

"WOMEN IN WATER MANAGEMENT"

InWEnt / ONEP / UNESCO Chair "Water, Women and Decision Power"

Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco, 26-28 March 2007

BACKGROUND PAPER

Water is the most important natural resource as it has a decisive influence on life. Its availability, in terms of quantity and quality, has a strategic impact on sustainable development. During the 20th Century, world population tripled, while world demand for water increased six-fold. In addition to populations needs for drinking water, various factors also contribute to this demand such as agricultural intensification, industrial expansion and climate change. Water being a shared resource, there is a fierce competition amongst all concerned sectors and at times also between nations. Therefore, efficient water management is not only the key to economic development and environmental sustainability but is also a vital ingredient in socio-political stability.

During the last two decades, numerous national and international initiatives have been launched in order to improve drinking water supply and sanitation services for populations and many efforts have been directed towards designing sustainable low-cost technical solutions in most of water-related sectors. Good progress has been achieved but several health, social and economic problems persist that are linked to scarcity and non-efficient management of water resources.

Today, 1.1 billion persons don't have access to a minimum quantity of potable water, 2.4 billion are lacking sanitation and 5 million, from which 3 million children, die every year because of water-related diseases. Many countries will not be able to meet the targets set by the Millennium Development Goals relative to water and sanitation by 2015.

An interesting lesson learned from experiences worldwide is that financial viability and technical solutions are not enough for securing equitable access to water resources, neither for the durability of water infrastructures. There are other equally important aspects such as regulations, legal and institutional rights, social relations, cultures and traditions. More attention needs to be given to water governance and particularly to participatory community-based approaches that incorporate gender perspectives.

Far too often, decisions and commitments related to water use and management do not tackle the equitable division between women and men for work, power, benefits, access to and control of resources. A striking example is that in most cultures, and may be more so in Arab countries, women are primarily responsible for the use and management of water resources, sanitation and health at the domestic level, and yet they are hardly ever involved in decisions concerning the design and location of facilities. Women and girls are often the ones who have to walk long distances and spend many hours every

day fetching water which negatively impacts girls schooling and hinders the involvement of women in more productive and income-generating activities. It is critical that specific demands, needs, concerns and experiences of women and men from all social groups be taken into account in water development projects. It is also important to work equally towards building capacities for women and men in order to successfully face the multiple challenges encountered in water management.

Strengthening women's capacities in water-related sectors is justified by at least two reasons:

1. Increasing efficiency, since a more active and meaningful contribution of women in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, programmes and projects will guarantee that water supplies are provided and managed in a more sustainable way.
2. Women empowerment through improved skills and greater say in decision-making and in resource management with broader goals of equality within the society, contribution to poverty alleviation and social inclusion.

It is true that the importance of both women and men involvement at all levels of decision and implementation in water management has been recognized, at least since the 1977 United Nations Water Conference at Mar del Plata, and repeatedly emphasized during the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade 1981-1990. The issue has been raised at international conferences including the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women CEDAW in 1979, the Dublin International Conference on Water and the Environment in 1992, the Beijing Conference in 1995, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio in 1992, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation in 2002, the 13th session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development in 2005 and the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico in 2006.

The workshop "Women in Water Management" to be held in Morocco on 26-28 March 2007 aims at constructively reflecting this general acceptance for a more effective participation of women in water-related development efforts. It will focus on translating paradigms into concrete actions and accurate mechanisms to ensure that women's capacities be strengthened, their voices heard at all community levels and most importantly that their professional skills be recognized and capitalized on within water institutions.

The workshop is organized in collaboration between InWEnt-Capacity Building International, the National Office for Potable Water in Morocco and the UNESCO Chair "Water, Women and Decision Power" of Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane. It will gather 15 professionals from Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Morocco who will share ideas, exchange experiences and join efforts in order to set appropriate strategies for strengthening women's capacities in the field of water while taking into account the specific challenges facing Arab countries. The workshop will also be enriched by the participation of leading experts from InWEnt, UNESCO, and World Bank Institute.

The objectives of the "Women in Water Management" workshop are mainly to:

- Comprehend the situation in each of the participating countries concerning the role of women in water management, capitalize on lessons learned, highlight opportunities and identify limitations that can be overcome by capacity building activities and transfer of technologies and best practices.
- Go beyond the simple desirability of balanced roles between men and women, and define what women can contribute to the efficient management of water and how it can be put into practice.
- Discuss and evaluate the relevance of affirmative action policies and gender-biased laws that aim to encourage women's participation such as awards, facilitated access to micro-credits, quota systems...

The intended outputs will include:

- Concrete proposals for actions and follow-up measures that can be implemented and/or supported by the participants and their institutions such as policy statements, budgetary commitments, procedures relating to institutional learning, training, research and seminars.
- Differentiated mechanisms that target professional women in water institutions and women in civil society through selection and prioritization of tailored activities for each type of stakeholders at the central level and in the field.
- Building a functional regional network with a realistic action plan for data collection, training courses, workshops, seminars, communication and awareness campaigns.

Strengthening women's capacities in the water sector involves ongoing processes rather than one-off efforts and cannot be achieved in one single event. The "Women in Water Management" workshop that will take place in Morocco in March 2007 will capitalize on existing capacity building activities in the MENA region and will add a solid building block towards achieving measurable results. The dissemination of the outcomes of the workshop at the international level will be ensured through the publication of the workshop proceedings and a CD-ROM as well as via media communication.

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