

Foreign Voices



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Women and Traditional Knowledge in Drylands

Around the world more than two billion people live in drylands ecosystems. Women often possess the traditional knowledge to maintain sustainable land management practices but their know-how is often disregarded and their words are too seldom heard. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) recognizes how vital the women's role is in these fragile regions and is supporting programmes at all levels to raise women's active participation in the implementation of the Convention. UNCCD Executive Secretary Luc Gnacadja follows up on the exchange of the Bonn Symposium 2008 on "Sustainable Development: From Principle to Practice".

Luc Gnacadja

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**„Women in drylands are reservoirs of knowledge
that should be tapped more effectively“**



Women play a crucial role in sustainable development and land management in dryland areas. This is illustrated through the case of Dailibai, from the Raika ethnic group in western India. She possesses a reservoir of traditional knowledge that is slowly being lost in changing agricultural practice amongst the Raika in the dryland state of Rajasthan. Besides her part-time job in a government-sponsored preschool programme, she tends to her small herd of livestock, comprised of two goats and a cow. The three animals were all discarded by the owners because they had broken legs. Dailibai treated the animals back to health by applying a traditional remedy to the fractures.

The Raika are proverbial pastoralists and in their society women play a critical yet often subordinate role. They do not come forward or speak in the presence of their men. In practice however, Raika women are generally acknowledged as the ones pulling the strings. Their status is reflected in the proverb "Raika men are as straight as a cow, but Raika women are as cunning as a fox."

It is not, however, only women like Dailibai who have the craftiness of a fox. Around the world, women in dryland pastoral and agrarian societies possess intimate knowledge that enables them to survive very inhospitable conditions. Their knowledge is not of the kind learned in schools or from books. In fact, the literacy discrepancy between them and men is in many ways shameful. The Raika are just one example of how women play a crucial role in sustainable development and land management in dryland areas, which covers almost 41% of the globe's land surface, where more than 2 billion people live today. It does not matter if they are pastoral societies or more sedentary, agricultural cultures, women in drylands are literally reservoirs of knowledge that can and should be tapped more effectively in the effort to stem desertification and to preserve the fertility of some of the most fragile land of the world.

Women's knowledge in natural resource management and food security, including livestock management and veterinary knowledge, their responsibilities and, admittedly, their resilience have proven crucial in maintaining their livelihoods and cultures. Yet in current times of scarcity of natural resources, while stress and hardship rise for everyone, it is women who are most burdened with the increased workload as they struggle to compensate. Moreover, their ability to respond to economic opportunities is often constrained by traditional beliefs about gender roles in pastoral societies.

Gender divide in drylands

In general, a division of gender-based roles and responsibilities creates difficulties. In dryland regions inhabited by agrarian societies, men use more natural resources in agriculture for commercial purposes than women. In crop production, men tend to focus on market-oriented or cash crop production. Women often work with subsistence crops, minor crops, and vegetable gardens. Despite the complementary nature of the division of labor in these societies, the management of resources varies. For example, men use water for irrigation systems, whereas women may not have access to irrigation systems for vegetable gardens and subsistence crops. Similarly with livestock, men tend to cattle and larger animals that can generate greater revenue, while women care for smaller animals such as poultry and small ruminants.

Another, often critical, division in gender is the land-tenure and land-use rights issue. The very nature of pastoral societies, which undertake transhumances frequently, leaves them without secure land rights and ownership. These circumstances mean pastoral, both female as well as male, farmers have little or no access to credit to invest in improvements of natural resource management and conservation practices.

In many agrarian societies, women's negligible legal access to land and water resources make them dependent on common property resources for fuel wood, fodder crops and food, and therefore, for the well-being of their households. This entails risks for female household heads and their families who are subjected to potential depletion of common property resources. One major consequence of the lack of land titles is that women have no collateral, which is required from banks for loans and credit.

Under the circumstances of degraded land, restricted land-use rights, and their great responsibilities, women must be given and must assume a greater role, in the decision-making process in pastoral societies. The absence of gender balance in decision-making processes for the management of common natural resources often means that women's needs are marginalized or neglected.

Furthermore, women are prevented from gaining full access to advisory services as well as inputs and knowledge of new technologies that are provided to men in the same communities. Women's workloads reduce their free time so much that they remain less educated and have a higher rate of illiteracy. Illiteracy in return reduces their opportunities for gaining wage employment, which could form an important source of alternative income. Cultural norms restrict their mobility and prevent them from participating in public events and training sessions. In addition, and this is unfortunate, gender biases still exist at the national and international levels that hinder the full incorporation of women's voices and gender perspectives in the formation of policies and programs.

Actors at all levels should address these issues so that women can better be empowered, and even more importantly, so that they can empower themselves. One of the most beneficial approaches so far has been to provide women with newly introduced technologies. Combined with indigenous know-how, women are re-establishing soil and land productivity. Such projects need not be terribly complex. Often supplying seeds, tools and technical support is all that is needed.

Women as agents for change

It would be detrimental, not to support the women who live in drylands for they possess the traditional knowledge that is best adapted to face the modern challenges of desertification and land degradation and make these marginalized dryland viable.

They have shown that in groups, they are empowered in the form of gaining access to money from banks. They also gain greater access to modern technology and easily disseminate it amongst each other. For example, by gaining access to the Internet, women can not only share, retrieve and preserve information and knowledge but also can control their agricultural productions according to market demands. At the same time, traditional knowledge used for herding, planting, and harvesting techniques are important contributions to the adoption of modern technology. For this reason, women's participation in accessing to and deciding on modern technologies is vital.

The future of drylands depends very much on setting women on equal footing with men. Be it in the form of education, better access to health care or legalizing their land rights and ownership, giving women the proper support is a fundamental step to maintaining fertile land and reversing degraded land. In this regard, attention of policy-makers must be drawn to the participation of women in decision-making process at the international, national and local levels.

UNCCD stresses the importance of a bottom-up participatory approach in identifying, implementing, monitoring and evaluating projects that combat desertification. The specific emphasis on gender in needs assessments and solution design and implementation is an essential factor of program success.

In the context of the implementation of the UNCCD 10-year Strategy Plan and its derived programmes, the UNCCD secretariat is currently establishing a policy on gender, which we hope will become an important tool to mainstream gender to achieve the strategic objective of improving sustainable livelihoods of populations affected by desertification, land degradation and drought. Empowering women like Dailibai of the Raika and countless more like her can positively bring forward available national resources to benefit sustainable development in drylands.

Imprint

The **Development and Peace Foundation** is a cross-party, non-profit-making organisation which was founded in 1986 on the initiative of Willy Brandt. More information is available under: www.sef-bonn.org

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