

Brazil: Conscious Fostering of Women's Leadership

Challenges

The community of São João D'Aliança is located in the central plateau region of Brazil, where much of the original vegetation has been cleared to plant cash crops. It is home to about 6,700 people, most of whom work in agriculture. The municipality does not have a sewage collection or treatment system, and 23 per cent of the population in the area use alternative sources of water. Concerns in this area include:

- The disposal of animal scraps in the das Brancas River and domestic waste on the river banks;
- The impact of farm pesticides on people and the environment;
- The increase in diarrhoea during the rainy season, when rain brought pesticides into the river; and
- Gender inequalities stemming from a long heritage of male chauvinism.

Programme/Projects

In 2000, in response to farmers' concerns about the deterioration of water in the area, the local Union of Rural Workers in collaboration with University of Brasília (UnB) designed a water project with the community. The project identified that there was a need to join efforts to stop pollution of the das Brancas River and to rehabilitate the river banks' original vegetation in a women-led initiative, called the 'Water Women' project. The approach was designed to have each group of women adapt environmentally-friendly practices to their every day activities. Some activities that formed part of this project included:

Raising awareness, education and training on the environment:

- A collective effort to plant native seedlings in the most depleted riverbanks to rehabilitate the soil, prevent erosion, restore the original vegetation and improve water quality and levels;
- A waste clean-up campaign organized to raise awareness on the importance of proper garbage disposal and its effects on local quality of life and the environment; and
- A teacher training course in environmental education developed in 11 local schools to raise interest about water protection and conservation and enable the teachers to integrate the issue in their school lessons. Student workshops and school-based contests promoted the awareness of preservation and rehabilitation of the local environment and culture.

Gender mainstreaming and involvement of the entire community:

- A woman's group within the union formed with the purpose of mobilizing public involvement and assessing the community's needs. They visited community members to introduce the project, identify their needs and obtain their support. They also held a meeting to discuss future plans;
- Women were in leadership roles, including the positions of local union president and the technical assistant from the UnB; and
- Men protected the new planted seedlings and created artwork and music to support the clean-up campaigns.

Outcomes

Environmental impact:

- There is a visible absence of waste in the river and domestic garbage by the river banks, a considerable growth of new vegetation of native species on the river banks and decreased soil erosion.

Community impact:

- There is an increased community mobilization of people of all ages and backgrounds; and
- Community awareness of the immediate environment has significantly increased.

Women's empowerment and participation in project leadership:

- The women involved led a successful process of environmental education and river and vegetation rehabilitation. In the process, women's political participation was strengthened and public perceptions regarding their leadership capability were changed.

National recognition of positive effects:

- The organization has gained recognition at the national level through the award of third place for the 2002 Environment Prize von Martius sponsored by the São Paulo Chamber of Commerce and Industry Brazil-Germany.

The creation of an NGO:

- In the wake of this project, the participants decided to create an NGO to continue their work. The 'Water Women' (Mulheres das Águas) NGO was launched in April 2002 to support social and environmental development of the region, with a focus on improving women's situations, generating new jobs and income, providing education to youth and adults and preserving the existing culture and traditions; and
- The Water Women organization has gained formal recognition of its leadership skills through a recent appointment to integrate the mobilization committee for the local implementation of the national Zero Hunger programme.

Change of attitudes:

- The Water Women NGO has acquired respect and sympathy from the community's men; and
- There is now an increased acceptance of, and respect for, women's new roles as community leaders, resulting in more equitable sharing of organizational tasks for community meetings.

Key Factors for Success

Capacity building and mobilization:

- Technical support from an interdisciplinary group throughout the entire process;
- Provision of courses on environmental education and participatory fieldwork. Provision of courses on income generation assisted women to promote sustainable livelihoods; and
- Use of diverse activities to enable all community members of different ages and abilities to participate, including an active school level educational programme and the documentation and rehabilitation of regional traditions.

Gender mainstreaming:

- Inclusion of a gender mainstreaming approach in the project design, especially the decision to encourage and support women's leadership in all projects.

Main Obstacles

Gaining men's support was a slow process and participants in the group workshop reported that a couple of women who started in the project left because the lack of support from their husbands. The issue of male support was particularly challenging for the married women involved.

Looking Ahead – Sustainability and Transferability

Future challenges:

- Developing new projects to subsidize their work, setting specific goals and indicators to evaluate the work and finding resources to closely monitor the actions already implemented;
- Improvement of the Water Women group's internal organizational capacity; and
- Finding of ways to work in partnership with the city administration that target the education, health, environment, tourism and agriculture departments.

Further Information

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- Contact the organization (Organização Mulheres das Águas, São João D'Aliança, Goiás, Brazil): mulheresdasaguas@terra.com.br
- For a look at the Water Women project in São João D'Aliança (in Portuguese):
<http://www.prac.ufpb.br/anais/anais/meioambiente/mulheres.pdf>

Source

Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women,
Gender, water and sanitation; case studies on best practices. New York, United Nations (in press).