

Guatemala: Meeting Women's and Men's Water Needs in the "El Naranjo" River Watershed Organization

Challenges

The watershed of the El Naranjo River is located between the departments of San Marcos and Quetzaltenango in Guatemala. Where there used to be plentiful and clean water, the upper watershed now has a scarce and polluted water supply. The communities that depend on its water have a variety of different water needs that vary between men and women and urban and rural communities. For example, men use water mostly for their animals, irrigation and construction, whereas women need water for domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning and washing. Women also spend a lot of time and effort every other day hauling the water they need. These various needs have generated conflicts which go beyond local institutional capacity as well as traditional dispute-settling mechanisms. They have raised many questions for local authorities and leaders regarding the current state of legal regulations, and their application to the administration of water.

In order for men and women from the communities to improve their access to and control over water, they need to be organized so they can both manage funds for productive community and environmental projects, as well as advocate for their needs in municipal decision-making. An essential part of this process is for women to be equal participants in defining and representing the communities' interests.

Programme/Projects

The Fundación Solar is a private development organization in Guatemala that promotes the creation of social capacities among all stakeholders for the integrated and sustainable management of renewable natural resources. In its model, women are equal participants in gender-mainstreamed and participatory methods that enhance equity and efficiency in the management of water resources.

In 2002, the Fundación Solar started a three-year project in the area with the support of NOVIB (Oxfam Netherlands) to promote social peace through the construction of a more sustainable resource-community relationship. It is supported through several international and local NGOs and focuses on the rights and obligations of users, service providers and local public authorities. The project works by researching trends in water use, training municipal authorities and grassroots leaders and supporting social planning and organization processes, so that local leaders and authorities will develop and execute joint plans for sustainable management to meet the communities' needs.

Outcomes

- *Joining together under a single objective:* Before the project, people worked independently and looked after their own interests. They fought over the water resource. Now 10 legal associations have been organized with over 74,000 men and almost 78,000 women beneficiaries. The associations are devoted to promoting social strategies to improve integrated water resource management.
- *Training, sensitization, and men's and women's participation:* The project provided training and sensitization sessions in the communities. People expressed their interest in the training and the organizational processes. Workshop topics included caring for the environment and the watershed, reforestation, gender equity, conflict resolution and organization. Now, people are much more open to the ideas, problems and needs of others. Women comprise 51 per cent of the community association members and several women are on the board of directors. They set an example for other women in their communities.
- *Advocacy in water policy:* Water problems and needs still exist, but now people are more organized. As a result of their advocacy work, the water problems of rural and isolated communities are now being taken into greater account by the municipalities.

- *Income generation:* The associations are starting to have some funds, which they are using for small productive environmental and community projects, such as a greenhouse. These small projects provide resources to invest in other projects, which enable the associations to meet the needs of more people.

Key Factors for Success

Creation of community associations:

- The associations specifically addressed various water needs of men and women in both urban and rural communities; and
- Women represented over 50 per cent of the members and participated actively in the associations.

Gender Mainstreaming:

- Different water needs of men and women were taken into account;
- Consciousness was raised that women are the primary water users and therefore need to participate;
- Women participated in the organization and decision-making processes as well as in building income-generating environmental community projects; and
- Women are empowered through control over their incomes.

Participatory Processes:

- Civil society designed municipal water policies;
- The first association of municipalities was formed for the integrated management of water resources in Guatemala; and
- Joint actions are taken by the municipalities and civil society regarding water resources.

Main Obstacles

At first it was not an easy task to bring people together. A public information and education campaign had to be launched in the local language, spreading information through radio, posters, public forums, and vehicles with loudspeakers. Finally, people were willing to meet on the subject of the watershed.

Looking Ahead – Sustainability and Transferability

Lessons learned: Community education about water, the environment and societal roles will continue to promote positive change in communities around the globe. In the words of community member **Yolanda Pérez Ramírez:**

“We learned a lot from this project. We received training on working in an association, income-generating projects and the environment. Now we have a greenhouse where peppers grow with rainwater. This gives us income. We also learned how to use the water in an efficient way. Furthermore, we learned that we have to reforest when we remove trees, so we will continue receiving enough water to live. For women, this has been a very important experience, because it was the first time that we were included in an organization process and now people are listening to our problems... This has given us a lot of experience and others like to hear about it.”

Further Information

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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).