

Nicaragua: Gender Equality as a Condition for Access to Water and Sanitation

Challenges

In Nicaragua, 43 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, and only 46 per cent of this subset has access to potable water and sanitation. The departments of Leon and Chinandega are characterized by vast underground water sources; however, the population and local authorities emphasize water scarcity as the main problem. This issue has been aggravated by population growth and the inherited environmental deterioration resulting from agricultural industrialization.

In the latter part of 1998, Hurricane Mitch hit Nicaragua, leaving in its wake more than 4,000 deaths. Leon and Chinandega, located in the northeastern region of the country, were the most affected and to this day still bear the signs of tragedy. By 1999, the rural communities of this area faced a double tragedy: a period of drought (characteristic of the area) and high levels of contamination of the scarce water sources.

For the members of the communities located in this area, the transport, use and management of water resources, as well as sanitation activities, were considered the responsibility of women and children. During this period there were no mechanisms that supported gender equality to accomplish these tasks or social recognition of the problems the women faced as they conducted these activities.

Programme/Projects

The human and environmental impact and the losses due to Mitch resulted in the creation and expansion of several institutional programmes in the area. CARE-Leon already had expertise in water and sanitation and health education, thanks to their implementation of an earlier Water, Latrines and Sanitation Project (PALESA I), from 1995 to 1998. In early 1999, the Water and Sanitation Programme (AGUASAN) of the Swiss Development and Cooperation Agency (COSUDE) began a partnership with the Leon Office of CARE International in Nicaragua, to implement the second phase of the project (PALESA II) and later continued with the implementation of the PALESA III project between 2002 and 2003. The goal of this project was to exercise the right and access to water for the 17,000 inhabitants living in the 45 communities of these two Nicaraguan departments. It sought to achieve this goal through the construction of latrines and new water systems.

PALESA II was characterized by an institutional commitment of both agencies to gender equality, which was deemed a priority in order to achieve the main project's goal of improving the rural population's quality of life. Gender inequalities were identified as a challenge to overcome in order to initiate community participation and to improve the project's sustainability.

Promoters of the project, both women and men, lived in the community three days out of each week in order to gain the trust of all community members. They waited for the time when men would be home (usually in the afternoon) and distributed invitations to the community assembly by sectors. Promoters also recorded the gender inequalities found in the use, transport, and management of water. A gender sensitization workshop was launched to teach both men and women about the importance of their integration into the planning, organization, direction, construction, and administration of water systems. After conducting three sessions (one consisting of only females, one of males, and one mixed), men's perceptions about the use of potable water and sanitation changed. This resulted in more than 85 per cent of the 687 male participants understanding that handmade wells may not be secure sources of potable drinking water. They also accepted that household connections would benefit the community at large, both women and men.

Outcomes

- *Increased involvement:* The gender workshops conducted in 2001 and 2002 with women and men guaranteed greater women's participation (56 per cent). Women were elected to more than 70 per cent of the committees' posts and gained posts which were previously filled by men, such as coordinators, vice-coordinators and financial managers. Women's participation in training, operation and maintenance of the 276 water works was encouraged, resulting in a 37 per cent participation rate of women. Once the water systems were installed, the female leadership with its capacity and quality moved to other initiatives.
- *Education:* Discussions about sex, gender roles, self esteem, identity, rights and commitments benefited women directly. Moreover, the discussions also changed men's perceptions about the management and use of water. The methodology utilized in the education and training component increased the knowledge and the information levels of women living in rural areas, who were previously in a disadvantaged position.

Key Factors for Success

- *Community needs assessment with a gender approach:* This approach contributed to the men's acceptance of the construction of home water systems as a right. They continued to have power of expression within the community, but it was also demonstrated that the majority of people in the community preferred women to lead the Sanitation and Water Committees.
- *Institutional practices and methodologies:* The success of integrating gender equality in the access, use and management of water and sanitation within the water project was a result of the institutional practices and specific methodologies developed. On the one hand, the coordination of the gender approach and policies of both COSUDE-AGUASAN and CARE-Leon consolidated the project's goal of providing equitable and participatory access to water in rural communities. On the other hand, the Leon project directors, the Social Area coordinator and the men and women promoters aided the realization of the goal.
- *Significant women participation:* The awareness levels gained by a large part of the population, especially rural women, contributed to achieving a significant participation in different cycles of the project of young, middle-aged and elderly women, including mothers with numerous responsibilities.

Main Obstacles

- *Natural disasters:* In spite of underground water sources, Hurricane Mitch in 1998 followed by a drought in 1999 has made access to potable water difficult.
- *Disparity between men's and women's need for water:* In a traditionally male-dominated society in which men could list only two uses for water while women could list 11, an improvement in water supply had not been a priority for community leaders.

Looking Ahead - Sustainability and Transferability

The training investment demonstrated the importance of including an education component in water projects. The education component influenced a change in attitude, particularly among men, of viewing water as vital necessity. They recognized that access to water is a human right, one that should be attainable by all men, women, and children in equal conditions and opportunities.

Further Information

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- For information about the Swiss Development and Cooperation Agency (COSUDE):
<http://www.deza.admin.ch/index.php?userhash?34814011&navID=1&l=e>

- To read about COSUDE's work in Nicaragua (in Spanish):
<http://www.cosude.org.ni/>
- For information about CARE International's work in Nicaragua:
http://www.careinternational.org.uk/cares_work/where/nicaragua/

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).