

Nigeria: Using Gender Mainstreaming Processes to Help Protect Drinking Water Sources of the Obudu Plateau Communities in Northern Cross River State

Challenges

The Obudu plateau is one of two mountain ecosystems in Nigeria and is home to tropical forests with unique flora and fauna, as well as large pastures. The top of the plateau is also home to the Becheve agricultural communities and the Fulani pastoralists. In 1999, the Cross River State Government established a luxury tourist destination, the Obudu Ranch Resort, on the plateau. Large-scale construction of hotel and other facilities resulted in immense deforestation. Combined with pre-existing pressures on the environment, such as overgrazing and unsustainable agricultural practices, the development exacerbated the stress on available water resources. Although the communities saw the development as a welcome source of income, conflicts arose due to the multiple demands on a limited water supply. The Becheve women complained about poor family health, wasted time in collecting water, and poor quality and quantity of water.

Programme/Projects

As a result of the deterioration in the water situation, the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF), a non-governmental organization working on the plateau, started a Watershed Management Project. The NCF has mainstreamed gender concerns into its organizational policies and priorities nationwide. Using participatory approaches, the necessity of women's involvement was systematically championed throughout the project cycle. Women were included at every stage, in the design, implementation and monitoring of the project.

In January 1999 a multi-stakeholder management committee for the Obudu plateau was formed. Members were from the NCF, Development in Nigeria (DIN), Cross River National Park, the Obudu Ranch Resort, Becheve Nature Reserve, and the Fulani herders. After a series of discussions, it was agreed that one out of three representatives from every village including the Becheve, should be a woman elected to the management committee. At its inception meeting, the management committee conducted a two-day workshop analyzing current problems in order to plan a long-term solution for the sustainable management of the plateau's watershed. The NCF used the meetings as a forum to educate the communities about participatory watershed management and the dangers of unsustainable practices to ecosystems, as well as to sensitize the Becheve communities and Fulani herders on their gender biases and the important role of women in collecting water for families.

In the first stage, from 2000 to 2001, a watershed and watercourse mapping survey was conducted, concentrating on drinking water points on the plateau. Between 2002 and 2003, the second stage, a manual on watershed ecology and monitoring was produced by NCF. Six groups of women and a small group of youth were trained on preserving a watershed's ecology, stressing the temporary nature of the benefits of sand mining. It was recommended that fruit trees be planted around the headwaters of drinking water sources to prevent erosion and siltation, and to provide an income source. Conservation clubs were started to increase awareness about environmental education. Most significantly, women were encouraged, not only to attend management committee meetings, but also to participate actively in this predominantly male domain. In the third stage, from 2003 to 2004, discussions were held with the local health clinic on water-related health issues, especially diarrhoea, and the two reservoirs were built.

Outcomes

Impacts on women's empowerment and gender equality:

- Women's voices were heard for the first time as they contributed to the decision-making process within the community; women were encouraged not only to attend management committee meetings but to participate actively in this predominantly

male domain. Electing women leaders on the management committee became a source of great pride for all women in the community;

- Women were involved in the construction and maintenance of the reservoir;
- Considerably reducing the time it takes for women to collect water allowed women to spend more time on income generating activities, farming and marketing;
- Women's healthcare burden was reduced with a 45 per cent reduction in cases of diarrhoea in 2004;
- The time available for both girls and women to go to school was increased;
- The community's men were sensitized to the necessity of women's participation and shown how it will benefit them directly; and
- The Fulani herdsmen and the Becheve women were able to accommodate each other's water resources requirements through a negotiated process.

Empowerment of the whole community:

- The project taught a greater awareness of sustainable watershed ecosystems and their importance to the environment and nearby communities;
- Community participation increased as the community felt they owned the process and the project;
- The community learned how to approach the government to aid community development; and
- The project led to improved health and cleaner and closer water resources.

Key Factors for Success

Volunteers:

- The four volunteers working with staff of the BNR had a very positive effect on the outcome. Two of the volunteers were Canadians (2000-2003) while the other two were Nigerian (2003-present). Three of them were women, which made access to the Becheve women easier for project leaders. The female volunteer presence also provided role models that demonstrated that women could be in positions of leadership and contribute to the decision-making process.

Gender sensitization:

- The male volunteer facilitated a process where the Fulani herdsmen realized that they were discriminating against the women in denying them timely access to water. This new awareness led to an agreement where the cattle would be watered at lower points to avoid contamination once the reservoirs were built.

Main Obstacles

- The traditional village system is patriarchal, and endows men with all decision-making powers.
- Conflict arose between the Fulani herdsman and Becheve women over water availability.
- Before the tourism development, water resources were already strained because of overgrazing and unsustainable agricultural practices.

Looking Ahead - Sustainability and Transferability

Women were encouraged to pass along their knowledge from the conservation clubs to their children so there are now school conservation clubs, which ensure the planting of approximately 1,000 tree seedlings along water courses.

Achievement of gender equity is a long process and, in planning programmes and projects, gender sensitization and community participation should be broken into different stages.

Further Information

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- For information about the Nigerian Conservation Foundation:
<http://www.africanconservation.org/ncftemp/>

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).