

Women as managers of village water resources

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In rural Africa the time-consuming and burdensome task of securing water for family needs falls to women. Although women benefit the most when water points are built, the responsibility for operating them has by tradition been given to men. Often the results of that approach have been poor and the water points have fallen into disrepair. With the establishment of water points near to the point of use, the burden of collecting water has been lightened considerably. As a result, women have been able to participate in educational programmes and have established highly profitable enterprises at the village level. This paper describes the role women have played in furthering village development, and because of their demonstrated management skills recommends that they be given responsibility for the management of the water points within their villages.

For a long time in Burkina Faso, men have made use of dams, reservoirs or low-lying areas where they dug or drilled shallow wells, to obtain water for dry-season crops and livestock. In the past, agricultural water management policies have made this trend of male domination of water resources more noticeable. More recently, a new government policy has been taking shape which involves women in the management, and hence in the administration, of water resources. Burkina Faso's agreement to participate in the Promotion of Women in Water Supply and Environmental Sanitation Services project (PROW-WESS) clearly indicates the government's wish to promote the active participation of women in the management, maintenance and repairing of water points.

Meeting the need for safe water

Traditionally, wells, the most important source of water supply for the population, belonged to private individuals and, at best, to families. They had a limited period of supply and dried up as early as January or February, which forced women to walk long distances for water from January to May or to

spend the night at a well waiting for a trickle of water. Notwithstanding this effort, many women returned home with empty pitchers. Personal hygiene and the cleaning of utensils were then considered a luxury. The wells were often badly maintained, and with openings at ground level they were actually carriers of disease.

In those villages with ponds or dams, the inhabitants collected their drinking water from places where they washed themselves and their clothes, or where they watered their animals.

The first efforts to consider the fundamental need of the population for safe drinking water were made by non-governmental or humanitarian organizations such as the US Peace Corps and religious organizations. Generally these organizations helped populations to improve existing water points by deepening and widening old wells, laying conduits and installing pulleys. However, once the domestic water requirements of the populations were met, other possibilities which are dependent on the existence of water points, such as helping to achieve food self-sufficiency and training in health and sanitation, were ignored.

At the governmental level, concern for this neglected aspect of water supply began in 1982 with a series of village water supply projects. The government intended the inhabitants of the villages to be involved not only in digging wells, but also in training courses on maintenance, pump repair and water point upkeep.

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Village committees to manage water points were established, but in these committees, finance management was seldom entrusted to women. As far as technical management (pump maintenance and repair) is concerned, no one ever thought of training women. More often they were only given jobs as cleaners, responsible for keeping the water points and surrounding area clean.

One project, however, did serve as a pioneer with regard to the involvement of women. It was a UNDP-financed project designed to provide equal access for women and girls to education, and was carried out jointly by the then government and UNESCO. This ten-year pilot project sought to increase the educational and training opportunities offered to women. To meet that objective, it was necessary to allow women the time to avail themselves of the educational opportunities open to them.

Women's participation

As mentioned above, the task of fetching water occupies a good part of women's time. To allow women to take advantage of the new opportunities, the wells had to be near the women using them. Under the UNDP-project women participated in choosing the location for wells. Creating the well was a joint effort of the population: the men dug and the women and children collected the materials (sand, gravel, pebbles, water) required for building conduits. The village was responsible for feeding and paying the well-digger, who was trained at the request of the project by the National Training Centre for Rural Artisans (CNPART).

As a result of the project, in some villages water became available by paying a small fee into the local fund. In most cases, there was no charge for the water but, in order to pay for the repair of the pulleys or deepen the wells, a fee was levied. In many villages once women had access to a continuous water supply they began to learn new farming methods. They worked together to grow market garden crops during the dry season under the guidance of professional market gardeners or specialists from the Ministry of Agriculture.

Those crops enabled the women to improve the diets of their families. What food was left over was sold and the proceeds then paid into a women's common fund which was used to buy medical supplies for the village dispensaries or kits for the traditional birth attendants.

In other places where there are water points nearby, women have taken to setting up restaurants where they sell all kinds of food, and refreshment

stalls where they sell dolo and imported drinks. In still other villages, improved stoves, restaurant huts and kitchens have been constructed which are rented on a day-by-day basis and women have become merchants.

In the north and north-east part of the country, groups of women have become members of produce cooperatives. They cultivate plots in the irrigated areas adjacent to dams and lakes and sell the crops in the market. They acquired the plots as an organized group, and part of the production is distributed to members of the coop and the proceeds from the sale of the rest are used to finance common facilities (dispensaries, schools, cereal banks, shelters for mills) or lent to members at a low interest rate for small business operations.

The arrangements made by the government to supply water and the priority given to women by the government have made possible, not only the participation of women in all water-related activities, but also their participation in the profits accruing from those activities.

A role for women in the water sector in the new five-year plan

The water sector, with 24% of the total official investment of the new five-year plan (1986-90), heads the list in level of allocation of resources, with nine large-scale projects which cover almost the entire country. The five-year plan includes the special provisions in respect of women. As regards rural development, the plan will encourage women, through their groups, to play a prominent role in the development of the rural community. In the same way as men, and without discrimination, they will participate in functional literacy and other training activities for technical and administrative work. They will also be given technical support for the development of their domestic activities, such as kitchen gardens and raising small animals.

The technical personnel in charge of the village water-supply projects have come to recognize that in those water-point committees, in which the main activities (management, maintenance, repairs) are assigned to men, training for such work has not produced the desired results. Furthermore the daily maintenance programme for pumps and wells is often not complied with and repairs often do not appear and have sometimes emigrated.

In the light of the above experience and because of the entrepreneurial skills shown by women once they have access to water resources, the government technical personnel now believe that women would achieve better results if they were not restricted to merely cleaning and operating water points, but were

given more responsibilities and trained for management, maintenance and repairs, sanitation and health work, and also for water-related productive activities.

The political will to help women to take charge of

their own development now exists, as do the practical arrangements and predispositions for facilitating the task. What has to be done is to help women to become organized, to be trained and to keep themselves informed so as to be able to seize every opportunity.