Supporting women in watershed conservation and integrative farming: Organised Women's Group Building their Resilience Capacity

Over 85 per cent of Ethiopia's communities' livelihoods rely on rain-fed agriculture and are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. With increasing rainfall variability, ecological degradation, higher frequency of extreme rain, temperature spikes, and frequent floods combined with prolonged droughts, about 8.2 million people are already considered 'chronically' food insecure. Of that number, 65 per cent are women. Women dwelling in marginal areas and pastoral communities are especially vulnerable to this problem. This project aspires to organise rural women's groups from pastoral and marginal communities on participatory land use management to practice integrative farming systems on farmland areas and ecosystem restoration activities on communal land with an integrated landscape management approach.

Rural women are more affected by drought than men because they rely on natural resources for energy sources and water accessibility, are more responsible for feeding their families, and have reduced capacity to move due to childcare. This project is planned to organise a rural women's group of 40–50 members on watershed conservation and integrative farming around their home gardens to improve their economic and social capacity, ecosystem services for the area, political decisions, and empowerment on the land tenure system. They have weekly meetings organised by a self-help group to benefit economically and develop their social assets. There are also efforts to link them with local microfinance institutions to obtain credit services.

Initiative overview

Gursum District lies in the Oromia state of Ethiopia, approximately 600 kilometres east of the capital, and shares a border with the Ethio-Somali regional state. The area's agroecology is characterised by Kola and Woyna Dega, posing significant challenges, especially for pastoral communities and smallholder farmers, due to frequent droughts. Women, in particular, are vulnerable to the adverse effects on their livelihoods caused by these conditions.

To address this challenge, the adoption of a dual approach is proposed focusing on SLM and the economic advancement of women's groups. Firstly, we implement on-farm conservation and development work through an integrated farming system approach. This approach combines various agricultural activities, such as crop cultivation, livestock rearing, fishery, and apiculture, on the same farm. By diversifying activities, farms become more resilient, less vulnerable to volatility, and contribute positively to ecological restoration.

Secondly, we concentrate on communal land areas at watershed and landscape levels, engaging in ecosystem restoration activities. The goal is to restore degraded land to functional ecosystems by enhancing biodiversity, ecological niche, water capacity potential, soil fertility, and biomass increment. Activities include soil and water conservation, silvopastoral practices, agri-silvoculture, rotational grazing, area closure, tree planting, and integrated water harvesting management.

These initiatives aim to build climate resilience, promote livelihood development, and play a crucial role in ecological conservation. By implementing climate-smart agriculture, agroforestry, improved water management, and other sustainable practices, the impacts of droughts can be mitigated and degraded lands restored, ensuring a more sustainable future for Gursum District.

Women's involvement

The role of women in SLM is crucial in East Africa, particularly in Ethiopia. Women play a significant role in managing agricultural land (including irrigation areas, water harvesting, farmland, and settlements) and communal land (e.g. forest land, wetlands, and grasslands). SLM involves utilising land and water resources, including soil, animals, and plants, to produce goods, meeting human needs while ensuring the long-term productivity of these resources and maintaining their environmental functions. In this project, women operate various SLM activities, including soil and water conservation, water harvesting technology, irrigation development, agroforestry, silvopastoralism, landscape ecological restoration, integrated soil health and fertility management, and participatory land use management.

Women champions

Ferdahusa, a 35-year-old mother of three residing in Degahale village, Gursum woreda, Oromia regional state, Ethiopia, is one of the beneficiaries of the "Integrated Landscape Management and Food Security" project. Formerly reliant on selling local tea and coffee, Ferdahusa faced financial hardship, exacerbated by her lack of farmland and dependence on low-income activities. However, by introducing the project's gender-based socio-economic strategies and objectives, Ferdahusa seized the opportunity to engage in alternative income-generating activities. Joining the community gender team, she ventured into small-scale agriculture, renting 0.5 hectares of farmland in the Fafen River valley and initially focusing on onion production. With support from the project, including technical guidance and inputs like a solar water pump and seeds, Ferdahusa expanded her agricultural endeavours, eventually renting additional land and diversifying her produce to include vegetables. Within months, her income saw a remarkable increase, enabling her to construct a new residential house valued at ETB 830,000 and open a vegetable seed distribution shop. Additionally, she accumulated over ETB 900,000 in savings. Ferdahusa's transformation underscores the project's impact in empowering women and enhancing livelihoods in rural communities like hers.

Demak Situ Cooperative is a dairy farming group that uplifts impoverished rural women without land access. The cooperative cares for 11 Borana dairy cows through comprehensive training and ongoing support, contributing to livestock prosperity and land restoration. Diversifying their ventures, the cooperative cultivates vegetables and plans to invest in milk processing equipment, showcasing the transformative power of women's entrepreneurship in Ethiopia's agricultural landscape.

Challenges

In many sub-Saharan African countries, women face limitations in various aspects of life, including the economy, social sphere, environment, and political decision making, due to traditional perspectives, cultural norms, and other beliefs. Rural women, in particular, often encounter barriers preventing them from fully participating in economic activities, accessing social assets, and benefiting equally from environmental resources compared to men. Several critical barriers hinder the engagement of local communities, especially in drought-prone areas, in environmental conservation and economic development:

Limited knowledge and resources: Women in rural areas often lack access to modern education, resulting in a limited understanding of resource management, leadership roles, and political decision making. Additionally, they face challenges in accessing land for investment, as men at household and community levels predominantly control economic resources.

Land tenure issues: Local governments do not always recognise women's land access rights equally with men's, which can hinder their involvement in watershed management or conservation efforts.

Policy gaps in gender mainstreaming: In many countries, there is a lack of proper policies and advocacy to support women's land accessibility rights and economic empowerment, leading to unclear land tenure rights for women.

Gender disparities: Women are often vulnerable to gender inequality, sexual harassment, discrimination, and abuse, further limiting their participation and opportunities.

Gender division of labour: Societal norms dictate specific roles for men and women, affecting the distribution of work and opportunities, with women often relegated to less valued or unpaid tasks.

Systemic discrimination: Policies and practices embedded within systems can systematically exclude women and minorities, requiring affirmative measures to address and rectify these inequities.

Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive efforts to promote gender equality, including policy reforms, educational initiatives, and community engagement to challenge traditional gender norms and ensure equal opportunities for women in all spheres of life.

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