



Restoring fragile mountain ecosystems and empowering women economically: Rural Development Public Fund

In the remote mountainous landscape of Kyrgyzstan, rural women are leading an initiative that addresses the dual challenges of environmental degradation and economic hardship. Often from vulnerable groups, these women face isolation and limited economic opportunities aggravated by the harsh mountain terrain and the impacts of climate change. In response to these adversities, these visionary women have initiated a project to cultivate medicinal herbs on degraded lands.

This innovative approach not only contributes to the restoration of fragile mountain ecosystems, it also empowers women economically. The initiative addresses the intersectionality of these women's challenges, incorporating SLM practices to reclaim degraded areas and foster biodiversity conservation. This cultivation takes place in small plots near homes, providing women farmers the ability to work close to home and reducing the risk of GBV associated with traditional patriarchal attitudes. Despite these positive aspects, challenges such as illegal herb exports and destructive practices threaten the initiative's success. The project aligns with international agreements (e.g. Convention on Biodiversity, Nagoya Protocol), emphasising the need for a regulated system to reduce illegal exports and preserve local biodiversity.

The vulnerability of these women in remote mountain areas underscores the urgency of recognising and supporting initiatives like theirs. Beyond environmental restoration, the project envisions improved well-being, increased food security, and strengthened entrepreneurial skills. By harnessing local social entrepreneurship and ensuring equitable sharing of benefits, this initiative serves as a beacon for sustainable prosperity, offering a model that can be replicated for women's empowerment in similar contexts worldwide.



Initiative overview

At the core of this initiative lies a profound commitment to environmental restoration, economic empowerment, and the well-being of communities grappling with the challenges of Kyrgyzstan's remote mountain areas. These landscapes are home to vulnerable populations enduring limited economic opportunities, environmental degradation, and the adverse effects of climate change. Within these challenging circumstances, a visionary group of women has launched a groundbreaking project to cultivate medicinal herbs on degraded lands. This endeavour is designed both to rejuvenate the compromised lands and to provide a sustainable source of income for the participating women. Leveraging the region's biodiversity, the project selects medicinal herbs renowned for their healing properties and well-suited to the local environment.

Strategically implementing herb cultivation in small plots near homes serves a dual purpose. It facilitates land restoration while addressing a significant societal concern – the risk of GBV associated with traditional patriarchal norms against women working outside their homes. As primary caretakers of their families, these women play a pivotal role in the initiative's success. Engaging in SLM practices, they actively reclaim degraded areas, foster biodiversity, and mitigate the impacts of climate change. The harvested herbs undergo meticulous processing before reaching local markets, ensuring a steady income for the women and promoting the traditional medicinal heritage of the region. Beyond economic benefits, the initiative elevates the status of these women within their communities, recognising and valuing their expertise in SLM and herbal cultivation. The project initiates a ripple effect through knowledge-sharing and skill-building initiatives, fostering a sense of community empowerment and environmental stewardship. It emerges as a beacon of hope in Kyrgyzstan's remote mountain areas, showcasing that sustainable practices can yield positive economic and ecological outcomes.

Women's involvement

Women's essential roles in SLM are transformative and multifaceted in the drought-prone regions that define our landscape. These women, often the backbone of their communities, navigate the intricate challenges of recurring droughts with resilience, innovation, and a profound connection to the land.

Stewardship of natural resources: Women's stewardship of natural resources lies at the heart of their roles in SLM. Deeply embedded in the local ecosystem, women actively preserve and restore drought-affected lands. From reforestation initiatives to soil conservation projects, their hands-on involvement ensures implementation of sustainable practices that contribute to the long-term health of land.

Diversification of livelihoods: Recognising the vulnerability of traditional livelihoods to drought, women lead initiatives to diversify economic activities. Small-scale agriculture, aquaculture, and sustainable forestry are championed by women, contributing to their economic empowerment while also ensuring food security and financial stability for the entire community.

Community-based adaptation strategies: In response to the unique challenges posed by drought, women develop and implement community-based adaptation strategies: innovative water harvesting techniques; climate-resilient crop varieties; and sustainable grazing practices. Women-led community groups serve as hubs for knowledge exchange, ensuring that adaptive practices are shared and implemented effectively.

Water management and conservation: Effective water management and conservation are paramount in regions susceptible to water scarcity. Women play a pivotal role in initiatives related to the construction of rainwater harvesting systems, maintenance of communal wells, and community education on efficient water use. Their involvement in managing water resources is essential for the community's resilience to drought.

Education and capacity building: Empowering women is closely tied to education and capacity building. Women lead efforts to enhance the community's understanding of SLM practices. Through workshops, training programmes, and awareness campaigns, they equip community members with the knowledge and skills to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

Preserving biodiversity: The biodiversity of the region is under constant threat due to drought and other environmental stressors. Women have emerged as champions of biodiversity preservation, participating in seed banks, native plant cultivation, and wildlife conservation initiatives. Their efforts contribute both to ecological resilience and to the cultural richness of the community.

Advocacy for gender-inclusive policies: Women are implementing on-the-ground solutions and advocating for gender-inclusive policies at local and regional levels. Their voices are crucial in shaping policies that recognise and address the unique challenges faced by women in SLM. This advocacy extends to securing access to resources, land rights, and representation in decision making processes.

Social and cultural cohesion: Beyond their tangible contributions, women play a vital role in fostering social and cultural cohesion. Women-led community networks provide a support system that strengthens the fabric of society. Through shared experiences, women enhance resilience, encourage innovation, and inspire collective action in the face of drought-related challenges.

Women champions

Gulnur Chodronova is a dynamic community leader and a driving force behind the SLM project. With a deep connection to the land and a keen understanding of local ecosystems, she has spearheaded reforestation efforts and introduced water conservation measures in the community. Her ability to mobilise and inspire community members has resulted in successful implementation of adaptive practices, making her a true champion at the grassroots level.

Gulmira Bektemirova is a local district-level advocate for SLM who tirelessly works to bridge local initiatives with broader policy frameworks. As a vocal proponent of gender-inclusive policies, she has played a pivotal role in influencing strategies for drought resilience. Bektemirova's advocacy for women's rights in land management has elevated the project to the national level, ensuring that the voices of vulnerable women in drought-prone regions are heard at the highest levels.



Sonungul Zhyltyrova stands out as an innovator in sustainable agriculture and economic diversification. Her groundbreaking work – introducing climate-resilient crop varieties and establishing small-scale enterprises – has transformed local economies and become a model for neighbouring communities. Zhyltyrova's collaborative approach has created a network of regional champions, fostering a culture of knowledge exchange and shared success in combatting drought.

Begay Murzalieva is a cultural and community cohesion advocate whose role extends beyond the tangible impacts of the project. Recognising the importance of preserving local traditions amidst environmental changes, she has initiated programmes that celebrate Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. Her efforts ensure the community remains connected to its heritage, fostering a sense of pride and unity while collectively navigating the challenges posed by drought.

Zhanar Algozhoeva, a capacity building and education leader, has been instrumental in empowering community members with the knowledge and skills needed for SLM. Through workshops, training sessions, and awareness campaigns, Zhanar Algozhoeva has elevated the community's environmental literacy level. Her commitment to education ensures that the community is equipped to adapt to evolving environmental conditions, making her an essential champion in building resilience at the grassroots level.

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Challenges

Despite the progress made in the SLM project led by women in drought-prone regions of Kyrgyzstan, several challenges have emerged that require attention and strategic solutions.

Limited access to resources: The limited access to resources, including land and water rights, is a persistent challenge. Many women face barriers in securing ownership or tenure over their cultivated lands, hindering their ability to implement long-term sustainable practices. Addressing this issue requires advocating for gender-inclusive land policies and securing legal rights that empower women as land stewards.

Limited infrastructure and technological support: In remote mountain areas, the lack of adequate infrastructure and technological support hampers implementation of advanced SLM practices. Limited access to modern farming equipment, irrigation systems, and climate-resilient seeds hinders the scalability of initiatives. Bridging this technological gap requires strategic partnerships, investments, and knowledge transfer.

Socio-cultural barriers: Deep-rooted socio-cultural norms often restrict women's participation in decision making processes and access to education. Overcoming these barriers requires targeted awareness campaigns and community engagement initiatives to shift cultural perceptions and empower women as leaders in SLM.

Market access and value chain integration: Connecting women-led initiatives to broader markets remains a significant challenge. Establishing effective market linkages and integrating these initiatives into value chains is essential for the project's economic sustainability. Addressing this challenge involves creating market-oriented strategies, enhancing product quality, and fostering partnerships with local businesses and markets.

Limited education and skills gaps: Continuous education programmes would empower women with the knowledge and skills to address evolving challenges.



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