IWRM Action Hub

IWRM TOOL - B5.05

Agriculture, Irrigation and Gender



Summary

Women play an important role in agricultural and rural economies all over the world. Access to knowledge, resources, and decision-making structures tends to be nevertheless dominated by men. This Tool provides entry points that focus on the integration of socioeconomic and gender issues in agricultural water management (AWM), irrigation, and irrigation technologies/resources — at the planning, operational, and policy levels; from small scales through sustainable intensification to agribusiness.

The Gender Gap in Agriculture

There is ample scientific and anecdotal evidence that in most parts of the world women make essential contributions to the rural economy (and in improving rural livelihoods) as farmers, producers, labourers, and entrepreneurs. However, it is also clear that they still do not have equal access to the resources and opportunities they need to be more productive, food secure and empowered in human, social, and economic terms. Despite the key role women play through their knowledge of crop production, local biodiversity, soils, and local water resources, they are often excluded from decision-making processes in new agricultural water management systems and other projects and initiatives on natural resources allocation.

The gender gap in agriculture means that women and men farmers have differential access to (and control of) land and agricultural assets, inputs and services (such as seeds, fertilizers, agrochemicals, and farming tools); to rural employment opportunities; to education; and to agricultural information, training and extension services, technology, credit and other financial services (FAO, 2011). This gender gap at various levels is further aggravated by the growing competition for water from different users and sectors, which makes it difficult for poor or marginalised people, especially women, to

secure access to increasingly scarce resources such as water and land. The gender gap imposes significant costs on society, in terms of lost agricultural output, food security and economic growth. Which means that the case for integrating gender into projects is compelling from overlapping perspectives — from the standpoints of social justice, of the direct links between gender equality and poverty reduction, and of good business.

Agricultural Water Management and Gender

Until recently, the focus of agricultural water management (AWM) projects and programmes has kept revolving around technical and engineering matters. There is now ample consensus that AWM is essential to food security, but it also plays a fundamental role in building human capital in rural areas. Yet, not unfrequently, AWM design fails to recognize that women are water users and farmers in their own right. Only rarely resources are allocated to allow planners and project staff to have a better understanding of the social, economic, and institutional reality of the project area. These professionals may encounter difficulties in targeting women (for example, because of sociocultural norms), and therefore fail to recognize their agricultural work, or, more generally, their knowledge, tasks, needs and requirements in relation to water resources and agriculture water management.

Indicators for Measuring Gender Issues in AWM

Developing “water and gender” indicators are the first step in mainstreaming gender in AWM. Gathering gender-disaggregated data is key to developing effective actions at the beginning of a project and tracking progress as it is being implemented (Tool B5.01; Tool B5.02). During later stages of the project cycle, field research methods (in particular participatory methodologies) can be used that capture how men and women are taking up the existing opportunities, asset control, use and benefit utilisation; or that aim at identifying gender norms to support effective implementation of transformative gender equity policies, which are of great benefit. A common set of indicators that can be used in the gender context of AWM include:

- Indicators to disaggregate by gender: Remuneration of paid labour (difference in salary); participation in outreach meetings related to irrigation development.
- Indicators related to the water resources (water quantity and quality): Perception (by women and by men) of the role played by the women in the preservation of the resource, knowledge of the resource, water saving practices, perception and practices related to water quality, risk perception, degree of sensitivity to the availability/value of water.
- Indicators related to irrigation and drainage development: Percentage of the area equipped for irrigation managed by women; Percentage of the agricultural holdings with irrigation managed by women.

Practical Approaches for Including Gender in AMW

There are several practical methodological guides that have been specifically developed for integrating gender into the agriculture sector. This includes, among others:

- Gender in Irrigation Learning and Improvement Tool (GILIT) was developed by the CGIAR

Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) (Lefore et al., 2017a). GILIT was designed to meet the need of an easily applicable tool for small irrigation schemes and projects that want to improve and track their gender performance The pilot was implemented in Uzbekistan and Malawi on existing irrigation schemes (Lefore et al., 2017b). The GILIT provides a set of indicators and questionnaires focusing on three areas relating to “men’s and women’s access to irrigation scheme resources”, “men’s and women’s participation in scheme management”, “men’s and women’s access to scheme benefits”.

- Global Information System on Water and Agriculture developed by FAO AQUASTAT offers a “water and gender” subsection with case studies from Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco which explored gender issues and the role of women in agricultural water resources management (FAO, 2014; 2021). The detailed reports from 2014 and 2016 and questionnaires are only available in French. They developed gender-sensitive indicators and designed a questionnaire specifically aimed at agricultural holdings with an irrigation system.

Thematic Tagging
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