

Embracing gender for sustainable land management

Sustainable land management has moved a long way over the last 50 years from “saving the soil” to a focus on healthy ecosystems and prosperous people. During the same period, gender equality in development has evolved from merely increasing women’s participation to actively addressing inequalities. WOCAT and UNCCD have created a tool to assess the gender responsiveness of sustainable land management technologies and identify opportunities for improvement.

By Camilla Steinböck, Rima Mekdaschi Studer, Nicole Harari, Joana Eichenberger and William Critchley

Conventionally, soil conservation was thought of as preventing soil erosion. The key practices were cross-slope barriers: whether earth terraces, stone lines or check dams in gullies. But gradually views changed. The enemy is no longer seen as erosion itself, but land left exposed to the destructive powers of rainfall and wind. So, remedies have moved towards regreening the land. Sustainable land management (SLM) has become the key focus and the new term. Moreover, although it may not seem obvious, the health of the land and women’s empowerment are closely connected. The reason is that practices that increase vegetative cover, and thereby protect the land, whether mulching or intercropping, agroforestry or fodder production, are those where women are most involved. These technologies tend to be strongly related to food, nutrition and income.

Discussion of gender in development issues rightly focuses on the inequalities between women and men, and especially on women’s disadvantages. But “gender” is not a synonym for women. Rather, men and collaboration between women and men must be an integral part of any conversation about gender. Nevertheless, in many aspects of environment and development, women are unsung agents of change. In this article, we look on their current and potential contribution to SLM – and that’s almost certainly underestimated. Giving them a voice and investing in their latent capacity will surely be rewarding.

Awareness of gender inequality, and what can be achieved by closing the gap, is the starting point. But what is the way forward? It’s an important first step to recognise that SLM technologies are not gender neutral. The World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT), hosted by the Centre for Development and Environment, University of Bern, Switzerland, has been recording data about SLM since its inception 35 years ago. One long-standing question inquired whether men or women, or both, were particularly associated with a given technology group. Interestingly, analysis of respective data

suggests that teamwork involving men and women is key for most technologies to function holistically. But in the cases where either men or women take the lead there are clear differences between typologies of technologies. For example, cross-slope measures like the construction of terraces are nearly 15 times as likely to be men’s concerns. Contrastingly, productive home gardens are three times as likely to be under women’s control. These broad findings obviously warrant deeper investigation.

Equal access to SLM technologies is context- and technology-specific

The realisation that much was to be gained from diving deeper into the topic triggered a joint initiative by the WOCAT and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in 2020, namely the development of a prototype gender questionnaire to pick up more detailed information about women and SLM. The gender-responsive SLM tool was reviewed during a consultation workshop with experts from different organisations and regions, resulting in the fine-tuning of the tool. The results, from 15 countries, showed clearly that equal access to SLM technologies and approaches is both context- and technology-specific and generated several key

messages. Amongst those messages are: “Men and women differ in their SLM adoption preferences and patterns” and “Gender-blind technology design and dissemination may even reinforce existing prejudices and customs”. These hard-hitting findings were key stimuli for taking the next step.

Thus “Gender-responsive sustainable land management” is the theme of a follow-up WOCAT-UNCCD initiative. The idea is to add a gender lens to assessment of SLM practices. This initiative is supported by the gender questionnaire (QG), which was further refined as a tool to pick up disaggregated data on gender in SLM. That data can then be documented and shared on the WOCAT database. The overall aim is increased adoption of SLM by both women and men through identifying appropriate gender-responsive solutions.

Gender-responsiveness is context specific, but there are common denominators. So far, WOCAT’s experience with gender has led to the conclusion that barriers preventing women from adopting SLM include poor education, unequal access to inputs, land tenure issues and above all, inappropriate messages which do not reach the right groups in the best way. The tool will help to uncover the gender context of SLM, examine the underlying issues, and – it is hoped – lead to novel solutions for

Rice straw mulching in LAO PDR

Soudaphone Lindasouk uses decomposed rice straw as a mulch on vegetables: it improves soil moisture and provides organic matter to the soil near her homestead. It’s a cost-effective soil amendment which ensures better yields – that’s more food and increased income. The main issue here is transportation of the rice straw from the fields. Men have motorbikes – if they could be persuaded to be more involved, then the technology could reach further by becoming more gender-responsive.



Photo: National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute

specific targeting and promotion. Thus, it enables land users and specialists to collect gender disaggregated data, search for gender-responsive solutions, and form a platform to discuss gender and SLM. And that's key to help evidence-based decision support.

What's also groundbreaking is that this tool solicits ideas and potential solutions from the communities themselves, set in their own contexts. Based on focus groups and key informants it asks for their responses and ideas, and it facilitates the development of internally generated recommendations. Previous documentation has illustrated myriad SLM practices in the hands of women (see examples in Box). The new tool will add crucial data to such cases. Perhaps more women than we thought are taking matters into their own hands? Is there a strong link to the domestic economy that's driving women's efforts? Are women involved in a much wider range of SLM than previously recognised? Could the best way forward with many practices be to highlight the advantages of men-women cooperation and show how specific roles can be best allocated? Answering such questions will assist in developing clear messages and is also the best way of targeting women in particular with relevant ideas.

On track for gender-responsive SLM

Addressing gender in SLM is not simply about creating definition of roles: it's about finding out what suits who the best – and then nurturing potential. Collecting gender-disaggregated data is a firm foundation. Gathering knowledge and ideas from the target group themselves is a fully participatory approach with a novel twist. While acknowledging that socio-cultural barriers exist, it's important to know what they are. And though it may not always be possible



Assessing the gender responsiveness of sustainable land management technologies is to help increase its adoption by both women and men.

Photo: Ana Maria Buitron

to break them down, at least raising awareness about them can help – and they can then be tabled for discussion.

A call for interest in using the new tool has led to considerable feedback. Over 100 organisations submitted applications for 40 available places. Those places have been filled using specific criteria: involvement in SLM, potential to reach women, regional representation and a spectrum of types or organisations. The tool has just been activated – as of November 2024 – and data are sure to flow fast. That's awaited with keen anticipation. It is the key step in integrating gender-responsive approaches into SLM to effectively leverage women's unique perspectives and expertise.

This gender-responsive SLM initiative is further evidence that the new approaches towards SLM and gender are converging on their journey towards mutually supportive goals. By approaching gender inclusively, land degradation

will be addressed more effectively. Of equal importance, women and men, who depend on the health of the land, can be supplied with SLM solutions that are more relevant to, and supportive of, their livelihoods.

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Beekeeping in Colombia

In Colombia, the Abril family keep native bees for honey. This stingless bee nests in rotting tree branches. Nest are sought out, and branches with bees are brought home and looked after. This sustainable practice yields honey – and through pollination, the bees maintain the indigenous ecosystem. While the physical strength of men is relied upon, the community thinks more participation from women in beekeeping would add value to the practice, while improving gender equality in land management.



Photo: Natalia Roa

Agroforestry in Kenya

Penina Kiilu is a self-taught expert in growing and using multipurpose *Grevillea robusta* trees around her home. She knows when and how to prune them. The leaves are used for mulching and the trees provide poles and fuelwood, and act as windbreaks. That's good for SLM, and good for Penina and her family. But it's hard and time-consuming work, and a good example of where a gender-responsive solution would be to involve men in taking more interest and active responsibility.



Photo: Will Critchley