

Gender and Community Conservation

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To conserve the fragile mangrove ecosystem in the Gulf of Fonseca, bordered by Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras, restrictions were placed on fishing in the estuaries, and attempts were made to preserve the forest and limit firewood use. Men in this region fish in the open sea and therefore were not affected. Women, however, support the household through estuary fishing and firewood collection. Valuing household survival over officially mandated restrictions, women continued to fish in the estuary secretly and gather firewood for their own use or to sell.

The need to invest in conservation and to minimize environmental destruction is indisputable. Diverse ecosystems provide abundant food and water sources. Furthermore, the links among ecosystems sustain life: Forests protect soils, healthy soils provide for the recycling of nutrients, and nutrients in turn are the basis for new growth. The net economic benefits of biodiversity are estimated to be at least \$3 trillion per year, or 11 percent of the annual world economic output. And medicines derived from local flora and fauna form the basis of primary healthcare for 80 percent of people in developing countries. Yet human induced changes to biodiversity habitats are leading to the extinction of major species. Between 1980 and 1990, tropical forests shrank an average of nearly 1 percent per year. At this rate of habitat destruction, 5 to 10 percent of tropical forest plant and animal species may face extinction within 30 years.

Why Community Conservation?

Yet, as the example above illustrates, successful conservation efforts are as much about people as they are about well-intentioned rules and regulations. Environmental problems often demand local solutions derived from community initiatives. Depending on the way natural resources are used, local people can have a positive or negative impact on programs.

To maximize the chances that conservation initiatives and projects will succeed, those at the community level need to be invested in both the concept and the approach. This means their participation in decision-making processes and in the evaluation, monitoring, and management of natural resources and the environment. This inclusiveness is more likely to build a conservation ethic where people understand that their wellbeing depends on healthy maintenance of the environment. Moreover, the participation of local people is one of the surest ways to build long-term capacity to maintain project gains once the original activity is complete.

Different Genders, Different Roles

The conservation of biodiversity relies on the involvement of the full community- both women and men- whose interests and perspectives regarding natural resources may differ.

Often, an ostensibly gender-neutral initiative may in fact be biased against women. For example, in some cultures, women are discouraged from participating, or are dominated by men, in meetings to determine plans that will affect their day-to-day activities surrounding natural resource use. Yet if women cannot participate in decision making, they may not engage in executing plans that will have a positive, long- term benefit in preserving natural resources. Because men's and women's roles and impact on the environment may differ, devising a gender-neutral initiative is not enough. Rather, there must be an explicit effort to understand these roles and then design a program that will accommodate the activities of both women and men.

Another reason to avoid gender neutral initiatives and programs is that they often overlook men's and women's unique knowledge of natural resources that can be valuable to conservation programs. In Rwanda, for example, agricultural researchers used the knowledge of women farmers to develop new varieties of beans for an extension

project. The yields produced by women were consistently top performers, in part because of their adaptation to the local agro-ecosystem and sustainable fit within the natural resource-based livelihood system.

Men and women will have different points of view and ideas for solutions about the same problems. To understand how gender shapes activities affecting the environment, it is useful to look at who uses resources and how, who is affected by resource use, and who has the authority to make decisions about resource use.

Different Perspectives

A gender analysis is an important step in understanding men's and women's different perspectives on natural resource use. This will help development planners design inclusive projects that break down assumptions about gender roles and barriers to women's participation.

An immediate benefit of conducting a gender analysis is the more accurate delineation of men's and women's roles. Women's work is often invisible or not recognized, cloaked under the catch-all phrase of "housewife." Men, in contrast, have more descriptive titles, such as "fisherman" or "farmer," that clearly delineate their relationship to natural resources. A simple way to obtain an equally clear understanding of what women do is by asking them to define specific tasks of their "jobs."

This will reveal the extent to which they work with the environment. A "housewife" might tend to the garden for family consumption and the market, care for animals for home use or barter, or collect fruit, water, and wood.

Making assumptions about the roles of men can be equally detrimental to a project. This can be seen in a USAID funded evaluation of environmental projects in five African countries. This evaluation shows that projects tended to target certain environmental strategies toward women because they appeared to be a more willing or reliable audience. The tacit assumption that men could not change their environmental behaviors meant that no efforts were made to include them in community action or other interventions.

Understanding the different priorities of women and men also helps to determine appropriate and sustainable interventions. If initiatives aspire to reduce or affect resource use that either women or men depend on, they are less likely to cooperate.

One common divide is those tasks done for commercial purposes (men) versus commercial and domestic purposes (women). In addition to pursuing income-generating activities, women usually have to meet the daily needs of the household, such as foraging for firewood, fetching water, tilling the land, and growing and gathering food. Men, however, tend to focus exclusively on income generation. This distinction necessitates that conservation interventions and projects adopt different approaches for women and men. Women will probably resist an initiative if they have no interest or involvement in its formulation.

Certainly, they will resist ideas that threaten their ability to support and sustain the household. If an initiative is attempting to curtail destructive commercial practices, men will need alternative options for income generation.

These differing perspectives can be seen in a survey of community members in the Philippines. Although both men and women recognized that the environment was deteriorating and resources were becoming more scarce, further probing revealed some differences. Men tended to describe the problem in terms of fish scarcity and reduced catch. Women focused on a wider spectrum of environmentally induced problems, ranging from sanitation, health, food for their families, and lack of raw marine materials for shellcraft, sale, and eating. Therefore, women would probably not develop or be interested in a program focusing just on fish. Instead, they would likely focus on a broader range of activities to prevent further environmental degradation.

The same study showed that it was women who seemed more aware of particular practices that exploit natural resources. Knowing this, special efforts should be undertaken to ensure that men share this knowledge.

Overcoming Barriers

It is important to understand the different ways that the activities of women and men affect the environment and their distinct approaches and attitudes toward conservation and resource use. However, institutional and cultural barriers often complicate efforts to account for these differences in the implementation of projects and initiatives.

Women often play leadership roles in promoting an environmental ethic. In addition, women's contributions to environmental management usually take place at the local level, where decentralized action on environmental issues is most needed and decisive. Yet it is typically men who dominate in formal leadership roles and positions. Women's formal involvement is scarce at all levels, from local positions to the ranks where official environmental policies are determined. This institutional bias is exacerbated by the fact that organizers often overlook women.

In addition, men may be jealous or dismissive of women leaders. These biases against women can compel them to develop their own areas of leadership. This is the case in Brazil, where men dominate in institutional politics. Women, more active in noninstitutional politics where they can skirt the cultural norms that keep them out of formal leadership roles, are the heart of social movements that often address environmental concerns, such as pollution and water scarcity.

Project implementers can foster greater women's participation by working with community members to establish a women's association of leaders and professionals or to tap into women's groups. For example, project organizers working with protected areas in Guatemala recognized that women leaders were not working collaboratively. To address their isolation and strengthen the potential of women's contributions for this project, it was recommended that a women's association of leaders and professionals be formed.

Project implementers can offer professional development training for women. In situations where women are moving into jobs traditionally held only by men, training can help prepare men to work professionally with women. Also, new areas that have yet to be characterized as "women's work" or "men's work"- such as growing organic shade-grown coffee- provide opportunities to employ equal numbers of women and men.

Institutional norms can result in the involuntary exclusion of women, even with the best- planned project. Media and educational materials on conservation and resource management tend to project a male bias, which sends an indirect message that undermines women's potential. This bias can be countered by ensuring that language in publications and training materials is gender sensitive and that anecdotes highlight the work and contributions of women as well as men.

Women's reticence in the presence of men is a common cultural norm that, if not acknowledged, can have the effect of excluding women from conservation projects. For example, when conducting a survey to understand gender roles and natural resources in Brazil, interviewers found that their questions, although heard by the entire family, generally were answered only by the head of the family- typically men. Women had little or no participation in the responses. However, separate conversations with the women disclosed that they felt more comfortable answering questions that were formulated by the women on the team. This simple strategy of hiring women workers can be applied to a range of activities, from community workers to extension agents.

Understanding gender roles, rights, and responsibilities is a critical part of the policies and programs that support community conservation efforts. Women and men are key stakeholders who sometimes might have conflicting interests in natural resource use and management.

Understanding their respective priorities and developing initiatives accordingly are crucial to the success of long-term conservation efforts.

A Day in the Life of the Rainforest

Beyond the high Andean peaks of southern Peru, toward Cusco, lie the lands of the Matsigenka. The Matsigenka are an ethnic group that has lived in the Peruvian Amazon for more than 600 years. Today, the Matsigenka live in state titled "Native Communities" in the central southeastern Peruvian rainforest.

Until recently, the Matsigenka lived largely apart from the regional economy. However, they are finding their culture, traditions, and way of life increasingly affected by modern ideas and technologies. Furthermore, their environment- inherent to their lives and livelihoods- is continually besieged by outsiders who want to use the land on which they live for oil extraction and lumber. Although outsiders are required to obtain approval to harvest resources within indigenous titled lands, the laws protecting this land are not always stringently enforced.

To combat these intrusions, the Matsigenka are training and mobilizing young, educated indigenous people to work with government officials who can help them. In addition, Conservation International-Peru has been working for two years to establish a portion of their land as a national park. Of several levels of land protection established by the Peruvian government, this is the strictest category. Land protected as a national park is subject to minimal destructive extractive activities such as timber logging, hydrocarbon exploitation, and extensive agriculture.

The Matsigenka have learned to live off the land in a manner that significantly reduces the degradation of the environment. Men's daily chores include hunting, fishing, planting crops, and buying and selling products at local markets. Women are responsible for food gathering, harvesting, animal husbandry, and household tasks such as cooking and childcare.

In December 2000, a photojournalist visited several Matsigenka who live in the Apurimac Reserved Zone. (A reserved zone is an area set aside for study that will eventually be assigned a permanent category of protection status.) The following stories that she gathered illustrate how men and women divide their daily tasks, using- but not abusing- the resources in their environment.

Nature's Medicine

Doña Vilma is seated on a wooden bench under a kapashi leaf roof, awestruck as she contemplates some discolored Polaroid photos. She does not speak a word of Spanish, so there is a translator to communicate with her. Doña Vilma is a highly respected woman in the community of Mayapo. She is the town midwife and has helped with the birthing of most of the men and women who today form part of the community. She also is a connoisseur of medicinal plants, which she uses to treat her clients.

"Doña Vilma loves children, she loves plants, she loves sharing, she has a very generous heart," says her translator. He goes on to explain that Doña Vilma, along with an anthropologist and an assistant, recently worked on a Conservation International- Peru project to identify and document medicinal plants. Doña Vilma was selected during the project's preliminary social assessment, which identified her as the most qualified person to assist with this activity.

Together they gathered more than 150 samples of medicinal plants. Their work has been recorded in a report in both the indigenous language of the Matsigenka and in Spanish. Today, it is used by the community, midwives, and health promoters. This report will ensure that indigenous traditional knowledge, typically passed on orally and rarely documented, is not lost. It also has helped to legitimize the use of traditional medicine to treat a variety of ailments. In recognition of her work and dedication, the men, women, and children of Mayapo built Doña Vilma a new house, where she now teaches her youngest daughter about medicine and medicinal plants.

Doña Vilma's work has not only contributed to the restoration of traditional Matsigenka knowledge- one of the goals determined by the community itself at the beginning of the project- but it has also helped raise awareness about the importance of preserving the biodiversity of the area.

Threads of Life

It is almost midday in February, winter in the rainforest. For the moment, the rains have stopped. Dorotea and her daughters are relaxing in the shade of their home and drinking masato, a traditional drink of fermented manioc. Dorotea is spinning cotton. Her fingers move so quickly among the fibers that it is impossible to see the thread spinning around the thin stick. This thread, called ota, will later be used to weave capes, dresses, bags, and a variety of other clothes.

Dorotea knows little Spanish. She speaks quietly as she lowers her eyes, not daring to make eye contact with her visitor. It is easy to understand her reluctance to speak with visitors from Lima. In addition to her unease with this second language, Dorotea never went to school- common for her generation, but rare today.

Dorotea has formed a solid home with Ramon Bernales Morales and their extended family. Ramon has a broad and good-natured smile and shows pride in his family when he asks to have his picture taken with his children and grandchildren. Just as the photographer prepares to shoot, he suddenly stands up among the children and tries to hug all of them all together.

Although farm work is shared, the labor is divided by gender and age according to knowledge, skill level, and cultural dictates. Ramon lives to work on his field and thus satisfy the needs of his family. He gets up early every day to check on his field where he plants yucca, corn, and peanuts.

"There is a lot of fruit in the jungle," he says, "the plantain being the most abundant. This makes a delicious non-sweet boiled dish and, along with the yucca, is our main nourishment." His son Ramon, 15, helps him with the heavy work: pruning, clearing, and using the machete to clear cut. Nevertheless at harvest time, the women in the family take control. They organize the harvest picking and gathering system and prepare foods from the harvest, which they share with relatives and friends.

Undermining Women Undermines Conservation

Women are not included in the Chattis Mauja irrigation organization in Nepal, even though they make up the majority of irrigation users. This has a serious consequence: Women farmers are able to take more water than they are entitled to, claiming they do not know the irrigation rules. The women also do not contribute the amount of labor required by the organization's rules to maintain the irrigation system. Given these outcomes, the exclusion of women in this organization has inevitably resulted in inefficient management of the system, compromising the likelihood of its success.

Knowing Different Priorities Makes All the Difference

In Kenya, local men involved in planning a fuelwood tree planting project assumed that women would fulfill their traditional role of providing water for seedlings. After the seedlings were distributed, the men discovered that the women were unwilling to do the extra hours of water-collecting required by the project. Furthermore, the women were not particularly interested in the trees designated to be planted. The failure to consult women in the planning phase of the project meant that their concerns were ignored. Not surprisingly, they were indifferent to its success, and the seedlings died for lack of water. However, the second phase of the project incorporated women's interests by providing the trees they preferred. They then agreed to help, and this time the project was successful. Preparing a plot to plant seedlings for a reforestation project in Zanzibar.

A Gender Focus for a Green Future

Managing Ecosystems and Resources with a Gender Emphasis (MERGE) is a coalition of nongovernmental organizations in Latin America whose members share an interest in and understand the importance of community conservation with a gender perspective. With the support of USAID's Women in Development Technical Assistance (WIDTECH) Project and the MacArthur Foundation, MERGE recently organized a forum so its members could share their experiences of using a gender perspective in their conservation work.

In fall 2000, members discussed what they had learned in separate meetings in Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and Washington, D.C. Several months later, they convened in Ecuador to share their findings. This meeting served to consolidate the lessons learned on working with gender and conservation in Latin America. At this meeting, MERGE members also devised strategies to share their lessons learned with other NGOs working in community conservation and to encourage them to improve their community conservation work by including a gender perspective.

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