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Encouraging Female Participation in Irrigation Projects:

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KEY POINTS

Identify the specific responsiblities of women and those of men, determine how they interact, and examine the nature of their relations as dictated by cultural traditions and/or religion.

Identify and study the different social classes which exist within the society to determine how a particular project will affect women at different economic or social levels.

Involve women directly in planning and decision making related to irrigation.

Ensure that women will not lose traditional land use or inheritance rights when irrigation is introduced and the value of land is consequently higher.

Examine the potential of traditionally female-run subsistence crops, both for improved family nutrition and income-generation.

Target women for training and extension activities.

Ensure that women will be renumerated directly for income-producing labor and control their income.

Help women save time so that they may be free for irrigation work, entrepreneurial initiatives, and educational activites.

Introduction: The Problem

Few irrigation projects have a specific component to address the participation of and impact on women. However, the effectiveness and success of an irrigation project suffers if women are not considered. Thus, the incorporation of women into a project is no longer just a cultural or political issue but an economic necessity.

Certain assumptions cause project designers to focus on men as the main target group in irrigation projects. These assumptions are often not correct:

1. A great majority of households are headed by males. In many regions husbands migrate to distant areas for extended periods of time to seek work. Divorce or death of a spouse also leaves a women to manage the farm as well as the household.

2. The household is a joint decision making unit and husbands and wives thus have the same interests and objectives. Development efforts have often targeted male household heads since the benefits will automatically "trickle down" to the females. It is now clear that because responsibilities within the family are gender specific, men and women may have different objectives, controlling different and sometimes conflicting functions.

3. Women do not participate in agricultural labor. This assumption disguises the fact that:

   - women are usually responsible for subsistence crops which provide most of the family nutrition (including home gardens);

   - women are often responsible for crop processing, storage, transportation of the harvest to market, care of livestock, raising small animals and poultry;

   - women do work in the fields, particularly during peak seasons of agricultural activity. They may not be included in surveys of agricultural labor conducted during off-seasons.

   Women provide sixty to eighty percent of the agricultural labor in Asia and Africa and forty percent in Latin America. Ignoring these facts when targeting development efforts leads to an exclusive focus on the male population, and a consequent loss in productivity.

Because of these assumptions, incentives for female participation have not been integrated into development projects.

Recommendations

Suggestions for integrating women into irrigation projects can be classified into eight general recommendations:

1. Identify the specific responsiblities of women and those of men, determine how they interact, and examine the nature of their relations as dictated by cultural traditions and/or religion.

Determine different jobs performed, expenditures, and food consumed according to gender. Other factors include religious obligations, inheritance patterns, marriage/mating customs (polygamous or monogamous), and changes in family structure following a marriage (who leaves home to move in with whose family).

2. Identify and study the different social classes which exist within the society to determine how a particular project will affect women at different economic or social levels.

Irrigation projects often widen the gap between the upper and lower classes of society, benefiting some women while hurting others. It is important to determine the repercussions of such development projects on all levels of society.

The effect of irrigation on upper class families is usually to raise their standard of living. Irrigation improves the quality and quantity of crop yields, providing a more steady and higher source of income. Labor saving agricultural machinery and home technology become more affordable and productivity levels are raised even further. Additional income due to increased productivity permits these families to purchase more and better food, raise more milk producing animals, and obtain more scarce fuels. In many cases, women in these families may no longer have to work as wage earners nor spend as much time on their household chores.

As for those within the lower classes who do own land, the new dry season crop resulting from the introduction of irrigation increases the demand for labor since modern, labor saving machinery cannot be purchased. Since poor families often cannot hire help, lower class women are often called upon to work in the fields. In many cases they receive little or no renumeration for their labor. Their own crops may either suffer or stagnate causing family nutrition to remain substandard and even worsen. The protein or dairy source relied upon through poultry and livestock raising (traditionally a woman's responsibility) is endangered by the reduction in land available for grazing. Other traditionally

female duties (childcare, vegetable garden cultivation, sanitation and health care) may suffer as well, making the opportunity cost of assisting men with irrigated cash crops too high in relation to the possible benefits.

During the rainy season, female labor may be in even higher demand but wages do not go up accordingly so that women prefer to work only in their own crops and perhaps in off farm jobs which provide them with better wages. Sometimes men choose not to grow a rainy season crop since labor costs would be too high.

Labor saving machinery as part of an irrigation project may cause unemployment among the landless or near-landless wage laborers. Small landholders may have to sell land they own if it cannot support them. Men may have to migrate to distant lands or to urban areas where job opportunities exist, leaving the women to manage any land left and provide for their families. If a woman derived income from working as hired help in the fields or homes of the wealthy, she could be displaced along with her husband as machinery now affordable due to increased income is introduced

Where women must gather sticks and shrubbery for fuel, privatization of public or communal lands due to irrigation makes it difficult for them to find fuel. The standard of living can suffer if fuel must be purchased.

3. <u>Involve women directly in planning and decision making</u> related to irrigation.

Irrigation projects often set up user associations at the beginning of a project. These associations are often made up only of men. Women very rarely play any part in the decisions made relative to agricultural planning and maintenance. Because it has been assumed that the household is a joint decision making unit, males are considered to represent the common interests of the entire family. Consequently, women's specific interests are overlooked and incentives for their participation are not included in the project.

Participation in decision making should be guaranteed through policy measures.

4. <u>Ensure that women will not lose traditional land use or inheritance rights</u> when irrigation is introduced and the value of land is consequently higher.

Male-dominated irrigation associations usually usurp traditional land use or inheritance rights of women. Even if titles remain in the name of a woman, land is controlled by the father and passed on to the sons. Women become displaced from

land which they have farmed for many years as men encouraged to produce cash crops push women off the land. Policy action must be taken to give women a voice in these associations and to strengthen existing female land claims.

5. Make traditionally female-run subsistence crops more important.

Traditionally, women maintain subsistence crops which serve as dietary supplements, while men are responsible for cash crops which are often exported. When the sole objective is to improve and augment existing cash crops as irrigation and new farming methods are introduced, (since dry season farming becomes possible), only mens' crops benefit. The fact that in some cases, the women's crop could be turned into a cash crop as well is often overlooked by development planners.

Thus instead of improving their own crops with the new irrigation system, women are recruited to assist with the new dry season crop. Family nutrition is compromised as subsistence crops are neglected. Subsistence garden plots have been too small in earlier projects to provide for familys' nutritional needs.

If irrigation ditches and water access points were brought closer to household gardens, subsistence crop yields would be higher, allowing for income through sales and/or improved nutrition.

6. Target women for training and extension activities.

Since information given to men is not automatically relayed to their wives, it is essential to train them directly for any work they will be responsible for. Since time constraints often keep women away from such training opportunities, incentives must be created to encourage their attendance:

- make it easier for women to attend meetings by holding them in convenient locations, offering free transportation to them, or going to their individual homes to conduct the training.

  pay attention to the time at which training is offered. Pick a time when fewer conflicting demands are being made on the women.

- offer grain or money to women attending training or educational meetings to compensate for their time spent there.

- employ female trainers and extension workers. This will allow for more understanding and a better rapport with women as well as provide role models for improvement.

- offer education on nutrition and sanitation (so that general health problems and water-borne diseases sometimes associated with irrigation may be avoided).

An example of successful female-targeted training is the Home Development Centers developed as part of the Accelerated Mahaweli project. Women studied a curriculum which taught home gardening and dairy production techniques. Women were provided with bicycles for the daily commute from home. (refer to document in packet).

7. <u>Ensure that women will be renumerated directly for income-producing labor and control their income</u>.

In most societies, both the husband and wife have separate incomes and family responsibilities. The husband provides shelter and works in the fields, while the wife has responsibility for bearing and raising the children, growing the crops which feed them, and providing for them. However, the wife normally has fewer income-producing opportunities. There are cases where men do give all money earned (including their own) to their wives who control family expenditures. There are also situations where the husband controls all of the income, including the wife's. However, the norm is that both have their respective income sources and responsibilities.

For women to profit from their labor, they must be paid directly. Since their gender specific expenditure responsibilities include food, medicine and education of children, these are the areas which suffer when women are not justly renumerated. In some cases, men will spend money on alcohol, religious obligations (trip to Mecca) or a new wife instead of saving it or spending it on necessities. While some actions may be justified, i.e. religious obligations, the family suffers nutritionally if the wife does not have access to funds, sufficient for the needs of the family.

Perhaps the best mechanism for assisting women in this regard is a women's credit or marketing cooperative. This ensures that women will be able to control their income receipts and implement their own private enterprise initiatives. Such an organization provides forum for discussion, planning and organization of cooperative efforts. It offers a chance for relief from economic dependence on men and consequent balance of bargaining power within the household.

Another possibility is that women be paid in kind (jewelry, livestock, grain) for their work. In this way, the intermediate step of holding cash would be eliminated.

8. Help women save time so that they may be free for irrigation work, entrepreneurial initiatives, and educational activites.

Careful scrutiny of a typical woman's working day will reveal many ways in which her time could be economized and consequently more productively used:

- inexpensive technology for preparing and cooking food which is locally constructed and easy to repair, such as fuel-efficient stoves, hand-operated grinding mills, and small presses (for palm oil, coconut milk or sugar cane).
- closer water access points
- fast-growing trees and a communal mechanical saw for easier access to fuelwood.
- light transport facilities for moving wood and water,
- child care facilities so that daughters, who are often responsible for the care of their younger siblings, may be able to attend school alongside their brothers.
- safety precautions to ensure that young children will not fall into irrigation ditches. This will free mothers and older children from having to watch their children as closely.

Conclusion:

Women are often eager to participate in irrigation projects. They realize the potential benefits if their rights are protected. The most effective way to ensure women's participation in a project is to show them that they too can benefit, that benefits outweigh the added burden, and to determine ways to alleviate their burden.

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