

Women's agency in water governance: lessons from the water and health nexus in Armenia and Ukraine

O papel das mulheres na governança das águas: lições do nexus água e saúde na Armênia e Ucrânia

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ABSTRACT

Water security is a global challenge and a collective responsibility for all humanity. The way in which people are affected by or impact on water availability, quality and management is quite heterogeneous; and it has a distinct gender dimension. Social relations between women and men result in gendered roles that vary between social strata, cultures, ethnicities and generations. In traditional societies women are often the water seekers and carriers, while their involvement in decision-making is limited. This article focuses on women's agency for sustainable use and management of water resources. It provides examples from Armenia and Ukraine demonstrating women's civil society contributions to the development and implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health. It shows how women's meaningful participation has made a difference, and sheds light on the preconditions for meaningful involvement of women's civil society in processes of water cooperation and participatory water governance.

Keywords: Participatory Water Governance; Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment; Human Rights; Leadership and Political Participation; Armenia and Ukraine.

RESUMO

A segurança hídrica é um desafio global e uma responsabilidade coletiva. A maneira pela qual as pessoas são afetadas pela água ou impactam em sua disponibilidade, qualidade e gestão são muito heterogêneas e apresentam distintas dimensões de gênero. As relações sociais entre mulheres e homens conduzem a papéis de gênero que variam de acordo com questões relacionados a estratos sociais, culturas, aspectos étnicos e geracionais. Em sociedades tradicionais as mulheres são frequentemente as responsáveis por procurar e carregar água, enquanto que sua participação na tomada de decisão é limitada. Este artigo centra-se no papel das mulheres para o uso e gestão sustentável dos recursos hídricos. Fornece exemplos sobre Armênia e Ucrânia demonstrando a contribuição de mulheres da

sociedade civil para o desenvolvimento e implementação do Protocolo sobre Água e Saúde. Mostra como a participação significativa de mulheres fez a diferença, e joga luz nas pré-condições necessárias para o envolvimento de mulheres da sociedade civil no processo de cooperação e participação na governança da água.

Palavras-chave: Governança Participativa da Água; Igualdade de Gênero e Empoderamento das Mulheres; Direitos humanos; Liderança e Participação Política; Armênia e Ucrânia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Water availability is critical in shaping the lives of individuals and societies. The way in which water resources are managed has evolved over time, moving away from top-down technical service provision towards holistic and more participatory approaches to address shared water challenges in a community, country or watershed. Since it was embraced by the United Nations in 1992 Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) has developed into the prominent global concept for water governance.

IWRM describes the what: an interdisciplinary approach cutting across levels, sectors and strata in society and giving due consideration to people and to the environment. However, the governance system through which IWRM is delivered can be organized quite differently according to geo-political, socio-economic and environmental circumstances; and it may include various degrees of stakeholder participation (e.g. OECD, 2011; Woodhouse & Muller, 2017). Gender refers to the socio-culturally and politico-economically constructed roles, expectations, and responsibilities ascribed to men and women, girls, boys and persons with other gender identities, which change overtime, are context- and history-specific, and are inseparable from power relations and societal value systems (Myrtilinen et al., 2018). Many scholars and practitioners have pointed out that the use of, access to and control over resources are intrinsically gendered (e.g. UN DESA, 2010; UN Women, 2014; Bordia Das, 2017; Sultana, 2018). Water and gender research is reported to be biased towards women as water users; the role of women as water managers has received far less attention (de Silva et al. 2018).

There is ample documentation in the water and development domain on how the lack of sufficient and safe water and adequate sanitation hits the poor and vulnerable segments of society hardest. Disparities in access to water and sanitation are rural/urban and wealth-related and coverage is much lower for minorities and other disadvantaged groups. While gender disaggregated data in the water sector are limited, it is generally noted that the larger burden still falls on women and girls, who are the traditional water seekers and carriers in rural and poor areas of the developing world while being largely excluded from decision-making and water management processes that concern them (e.g. United Nations, 2014; Bouman-Dentener, 2016).

In water and development policy and practice, women have often been addressed as a homogeneous and vulnerable group whose access to basic water and sanitation services is compromised hampering their possibilities to lead productive lives. The intersectionality of gender inequality is now increasingly recognised, meaning that disparities between genders are looked at in relation to social class, ethnicity, age, cultural setting etc.. The complexity of gender relations points to the need for tailor-made approaches when incorporating gender in water provision and management processes (e.g. Grant et al., 2017; Fletcher, in press).

2 GENDER ROLES AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Social differences between women and men may lead to gendered roles that can vary substantially between countries, cultures, ethnicities and generations. Such gender-related differences may result in different consequences of policies and programs for women and men, influencing their possibilities, potential, and outlook to lead productive lives. Distinctive gender roles also determine the options for women to participate in public life and therefore their potential contributions to society (GWP, 2014).

The agreed Sustainable Development Goals – SDGs (United Nations, 2015) address many of the structural causes of gender inequality, including issues such as elimination of discrimination, violence, and harmful practices against women, recognizing and reducing unpaid care work, promoting access to and control over assets and property, and reversing unequal participation in private and public decision-making, as well as achieving universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all, access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and ending open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. A recent global survey on the role of women in development confirms that domestic water and safe sanitation is a domain with a particular strong potential to transform the lives of women and girls (UN Women, 2014).

In societies where women and girls are the traditional water seekers and carriers, their influence in decision-making on water is generally limited (e.g. Kevany and Huisingsh, 2013; Bouman-Dentener, 2015). The positive results of involving women in the design and planning stages of water initiatives are increasingly coming to the fore. As an illustrative example, UNICEF (2010) points to an evaluation of 122 water projects, stating that the effectiveness of a project was six to seven times higher where women were involved than where they were not. Involving women in water decision-making also addresses overall questions of gender equality in the process.

3 THE HUMAN RIGHTS BASED APPROACH TO WATER GOVERNANCE

Sustainable use and management of water resources is largely about people; it requires a good understanding of the social context in which a water management system needs to function. The human rights-based approach (RBA), which underlies UN development policies and programs, takes this social dimension into account. RBA places people at the center of the development process. In doing so, it addresses social inequalities as root causes for the lack of access to water.

The rights-based approach establishes the obligations of States to ensure that basic water needs are met, but equally empowers people to claim their rights and fulfil their obligations as valuable members of society (Filmer Wilson, 2005). RBA is implicit in the concept of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and was further strengthened through the recognition of safe water and sanitation as a human right by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010. Other IWRM areas such as water quality, managing water scarcity and risks, and transboundary waters are governed by the principles of equitable and reasonable use and the “no harm” principle as stated in the UN Water Courses Convention or the ECE Water Convention respectively.

UN Resolution AS/RES/64/292 – proclaiming access to clean water and adequate sanitation as a human right – calls upon States and international organizations to provide financial resources, capacity building and technology transfer to scale up efforts to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all. It has an explicit focus on the most disadvantaged and marginalized, and it emphasizes participation, empowerment, accountability and transparency.

‘Realizing the human rights to water and sanitation: a handbook’ developed by UN Special Rapporteur Catarina de Albuquerque provides guidance for State actors to create an enabling environment for the implementation of these human rights, with due consideration given to the roles of non-state actors, and stating the importance of participatory and inclusive processes. The handbook states to that effect:

The human right to water and sanitation can only be realized effectively through full, free and meaningful participation in decision-making processes by people affected by those decisions. Participation ensures better implementation and enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions, offering the possibility of social transformation. Participation must be an integral part of any policy, programme or strategy concerning water or sanitation (OHCHR, 2014).

The central role of women in the provision, management and safeguarding of water has long been acknowledged by the international water and development community. It is anchored in the Dublin Principles that were agreed during the International Conference on Water and Environment (ICWE) in Dublin, Ireland in 1992 (United Nations, 1992), have been integrated in the water programs of UNCED Agenda 21 and are the corner stones of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM)

ever since. Evidence shows that meaningful involvement of women in water resources development, management, and use can lead to effective solutions to water problems, helping governments avoid poor investments and expensive mistakes, making projects more sustainable, and ensuring that infrastructure development yields maximum social, economic, and environmental results and furthers sustainable development goals (GWP, 2015). Notwithstanding the long-time acknowledgement of the importance of women in this sector, the potential contributions of women to water development remain largely untapped to date (WfWP, 2013).

4 THE PROTOCOL ON WATER AND HEALTH TO THE UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE WATER CONVENTION

Access to clean drinking water is taken for granted by many people living in Europe. Yet in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) region alone, an estimated 120 million people, i.e. one person in seven, do not have access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. In 1999 the Protocol on Water and Health was adopted by the parties UNECE Water Convention (UNECE WC) to ensure universal access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation for all citizens of the pan-European region. The main aim of the Protocol is to protect human health and wellbeing through good water management, including the protection of water ecosystems, and by preventing, controlling and reducing water-related diseases. The Protocol is the first international agreement of its kind, adopted specifically to attain an adequate supply of safe drinking water and adequate sanitation for everyone, and effectively protect drinking water sources.

The Protocol on Water and Health provides a framework for the translation of the human right to water and sanitation into practice. The Protocol specifically commits its Parties to promoting equitable access to water and sanitation, and setting specific targets and target dates. Each country that adopted the Protocol has the obligation to provide access to water and sanitation for all its citizens. Moreover, UNECE WC adopted a Gender Action Plan for 2012-2013 to implement the UNECE policy for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Women for Water Partnership (WfWP) member organizations Armenian Women for Health and Healthy Environment in Armenia, Earth Forever in Bulgaria and MAMA-86 in Ukraine have taken a leading role in organizing civil society contributions to the development and implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health in their respective countries.

4.1 WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY CONTRIBUTIONS FROM ARMENIA (AWHHE)

After independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia experienced a period of transition to a market-driven economy. Over the past decades significant political, economic and institutional reforms have gradually taken place in the country. One of the major areas undergoing change is the water and health sector. While Armenia has sufficient water resources to provide the total population with safe drinking water, insufficient investment and the collapse of water supply systems have resulted in inadequate and often unsanitary water supplies. Seventy-five to 85% of water is lost on its way from source to consumers because of pipe deterioration and other reasons. Over the last decade the government of Armenia has taken important steps to improve access, reliability and quality of drinking water and its infrastructure. The water resource balance in many parts of the country has improved and water supply in certain areas has progressed. However, in most parts of Armenia the institutional framework for water supply delivery remains poor. In addition, the sanitation sector had been neglected, particularly in rural areas.

Armenian Women for Health and Healthy Environment (AWHHE) was established in 1999 as a non-governmental women's organisation of health professionals and environmentalists. The mission of AWHHE is to promote the human right to live in a healthy environment and to address environmental pollution. Key activities include raising public awareness about environmental pollutants, conducting independent monitoring investigations on water supply management, and promotion of the Water and Health Protocol. In recent years, water and sanitation have become the main focus of the organization.

Since 1999 AWHHE has implemented more than 90 projects for the promotion of sustainable sanitation and improvement of water supply.

To effectively address the water and sanitation challenges in rural Armenia, AWHHE practices gender-inclusive community involvement and strengthens women's participation in decision-making. After Armenia signed the Protocol on Water and Health in 1999, AWHHE became a key actor in the implementation of the Protocol. As a national NGO, AWHHE functions as a liaison between the government and civil society and represents the voice of civil society to ensure that policies give due consideration to the gender dimensions of water and health. AWHHE influences policy and monitors State projects to ensure better alignment with the reality on the ground and to safeguard that the local population benefits from investments and interventions. At the same time AWHHE implements projects on service delivery that yield immediate results. An important part of the work of AWHHE is to strengthen local actors, in particular women, to become active contributors to safe water and adequate sanitation in their communities.

In 2007 the Ministry of Territorial Administration asked AWHHE to draft a Financing Strategy for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation in Armenia. Minimum water supply and sanitation standards were agreed upon by the stakeholders, and this involvement elevated AWHHE's profile and strengthened its capacity as a policy advocate. AWHHE played a significant role in the target setting process under the Protocol on Water and Health to the UNECE WC in Armenia. Through public consultation processes in 3 regions and drawing upon its expertise in water and sanitation management, AWHHE supported the government in developing draft targets appropriate for national and local needs. The process of developing targets, target dates and measures to comply with the requirements of the Protocol is on-going.

AWHHE works with a variety of partners: On the international level AWHHE actively participates in the processes of implementation of the Children Environmental Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE) as well as the Protocol on Water and Health. At national level, AWHHE participates in multi-stakeholder settings, such as the National Council on Sustainable Development, facilitated by the Prime Minister, and the Steering Committee of the National Policy Dialogue on water-related issues facilitated by the Ministry of Nature Protection. By raising awareness and building capacity of local actors, AWHHE builds partnerships for sustainable management and scaling up.

Together with partners, AWHHE has implemented more than 25 water and sanitation projects across Armenia, primarily in schools. AWHHE has conducted awareness raising interventions among more than 2000 pupils, staff and parents about environmental health risks and social injustice related to environmental pollution. The water and sanitation pilot projects implemented in 15 rural communities benefit around 20,000 people.

The school water and sanitation projects had a snowball effect on the improvement of the overall water supply in surrounding villages. Tens of individual households installed ecosan toilets, resulting in improved hygienic conditions. In pursuit of the social and economic development of rural communities, AWHHE has carried out combined water and agricultural projects throughout Armenia. Local women increased their incomes thanks to the construction of solar dryers for drying fruits and vegetable, greenhouses for cultivating seedlings, implementation of small grant programs on beekeeping, rabbit breeding, and purchasing of hens for egg production. Successful activities were scaled up at the local level and showcased in agricultural fairs.

A major achievement of AWHHE was the inclusion of women in the national dialogue on the Protocol on Water and Health. AWHHE has a consistent focus on women's groups in all its activities, with the aim of increasing the role of both rural and urban women in decision-making processes at local and national levels. To this end, AWHHE has organised seminars, workshops and trainings to enhance women's awareness and help them to discover their abilities to be active participants in civil society. AWHHE projects developed women's leadership skills, resulting in their increased involvement in community problem resolution through cooperation.

AWHHE's multi-level activities bring with them a number of challenges. First, it takes time and effort to build the necessary relationships and trust with the government and the population in the absence of a tradition of government - civil society cooperation at local, district or national levels. Second, the success and sustainability of projects depends on the acceptance and participation of the local population. Small-scale projects that are adapted to local circumstances and take into account cultural differences have proven to be more successful than large-scale projects. The scaling-up and replication of small-scale, tailor-made projects in decentralized settings is labor intensive and requires social and cultural sensitivity as well as adequate funds. The lack of sufficient financial resources remains a constant battle for AWHHE.

4.2 WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY CONTRIBUTIONS FROM UKRAINE (MAMA-86)

Ukraine is considered a "country in transition". Following the Soviet era and independence in 1991, the country suffered a devastating economic blow and the majority of the people live in various gradations of poverty. It was estimated in 2010 that approximately 24% of the population in Ukraine lives below the poverty line. Access to safe drinking water is one of the largest environmental health problems in the country, both in urban and rural areas. About 75% of the population is supplied by surface water, most of which is not fit for drinking unless treated. In addition, water tariffs are rising rapidly. The government is seeking to reform the water sector, and ratified the Protocol on Water and Health in 2003 to address these issues and improve the nation's health.

MAMA-86, Ukraine, is the foremost environmental, women's and social justice organization in the country and was established as a national environmental network in 1990 by mothers worried about Chernobyl effects on environment and health. It now has 17 branches in the different regions of Ukraine. MAMA-86 promotes eco-democracy, greening policy and practice, equal access to WASH, IWRM and river basin principles implementation, chemical safety, independent research, and public monitoring and lobbying. MAMA-86 works on strengthening the role of women in education and in the decision-making processes for improving the living standards of the citizens.

MAMA-86 has been a driving force behind the drafting and subsequent implementation of the Water and Health Protocol since 1998. Having built a strong network throughout the country, it is well positioned to raise public awareness and to develop and lead participatory processes related to different water and sustainable development themes. MAMA-86 also builds capacity for WASH implementation by conducting pilot projects in local communities and training women leaders to move towards self-reliance.

The organization has successfully lobbied and worked with the Ukraine government and supported the formulation of a legislative framework on water and health issues specific to the Ukraine context. Several laws, such as the National Environment and Health Action Plan (2001), the Law on Drinking water (2002), the program on "Drinking Water of Ukraine" (2005), and the national targets for the Protocol on Water and Health (2011), were initiated by MAMA-86 and drafted with strong public participation, informed by MAMA-86's expertise on water and environmental management. In this capacity MAMA-86 has conducted national policy dialogues and stakeholders' consultations on integrated water resources management under climate change and coordinated the GWP Ukraine contribution to the Integrated Drought Management Program of GWP CEE and WMO.

In addition to its awareness raising and capacity building activities, MAMA-86 is one of the major organizations implementing the Protocol in Ukraine and in the region. The network conducts independent research on drinking water quality and supply, and implements affordable and effective technical solutions to improve access to safe water and sanitation for households, communities, schools and hospitals. Since 1999 MAMA-86 has contributed directly to improvement of access to safe water and sanitation for over 40,000 people in urban and rural areas by implementing more than 50 pilots in 12 regions of Ukraine. They work with national and local authorities to ensure equal access to WASH for vulnerable groups: school children, patients in healthcare institutions, pregnant women and mothers with babies.

They have initiated and coordinated numerous public consultations, raising awareness and building capacity of the population with a focus on women's involvement in water and health management issues. Over the past 10 years MAMA-86 meetings reached approximately 250,000 people and its media campaigns reached an estimated 4,000,000. In April 2005, for instance, they organized the Earth Day concert in Kyiv involving approximately 200,000 people. In addition, they have actively engaged women's organizations in various regional and European policy development initiatives on water and health.

Since 1997 MAMA-86 has grown from 1 drinking water project in 5 locations (Kyiv and 4 local branches) to a network in 13 regions with over 90 pilot projects in urban and rural areas of Ukraine, all based on local ownership and women leadership. These pilots have resulted in the replacement and/ or rehabilitation of 3 water supply and 2 sanitation infrastructures, installation of 16 water purification systems for schools, boarding schools, kindergartens, sanatorium and maternity hospitals, and construction of ecosan toilets and 9 small wastewater treatment systems for 5 schools and 91 households in different parts of Ukraine.

Cooperation with the government at different levels has proven to be difficult at times due to constant administrative reforms in the country, lack of political will, and the low capacity of decision-makers to comply with Protocol obligations. Gaining the trust of authorities and CSOs and local communities alike is an on-going process. Local capacities are often low, and informing and convincing communities on health, sanitation and water practices requires substantial effort and resources. Scaling up successful pilot projects is a challenge; it also requires significant effort and resources to engage local actors and communities, and to build ownership and a legal framework for sustainable use and management. Financial and human resources are scarce, which limits MAMA-86's activities.

5 PARTICIPATORY WATER GOVERNANCE: THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY

Women's Civil Society is a component of the diverse and multi-faceted conglomerate of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). The term civil society organizations (CSOs) refers to the wide array of nongovernmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life and express the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. This definition of civil society marks a deliberate shift away from use of the term nongovernmental organization (NGO), which refers more narrowly to professional, intermediary and non-profit organizations that advocate and/or provide services in the areas of economic and social development, human rights, welfare, and emergency relief (World Bank, 2005). Civil Society Organisations include trade unions, community-based organizations, social movements, faith-based institutions, charitable organizations, universities, foundations, professional associations, and others.

Women's civil society has the female gender as organising principle and is quite diverse in itself. Many are social networks bonding women of the same professional, ethnic or cultural background, or with the same interest, religious or political affiliation; others bridge between women across different peer groups and segments in society or across national boundaries. The social capital represented by women's organizations can be a substantial resource for collective action at all levels, contributing to social cohesion, democracy, economic development and sustainability of interventions (Bouman-Dentener & Devos, 2015).

The examples of AWHHE and Mama-86 illustrate how women's civil society may contribute to water governance at different levels:

- Operating at community level to influence both community members and local authorities, and effectively bridge the gap between citizens and their governments. The examples of Armenia and Ukraine demonstrate how women-led projects raise awareness, can build community involvement and ensure that interventions reach the intended beneficiaries. They are prime examples of an integrated approach and include institutional arrangements for maintenance and management that fit the local circumstances, and that are endorsed by the community.

- Creating vertical integration, from community to national levels and vice-versa. Women's social networks are often multi-level enable them to work on different levels simultaneously. Deeply rooted socially, they have a potential to bridge levels and sectors, while practicing an integrated, people-centered approach. MAMA-86, for instance, has created a country-wide network working on water and environment related issues and partnering with State and non-State actors at community, regional and national levels.
- Providing the evidence base for informed decision-making. Besides raising awareness and building capacity of the population, and of women in particular, AWHHE and Mama-86 have conducted independent research on water quality and implementation conditions. They have proactively brought the outcomes of research and community interventions into the national legislative adaptation process and implementation plans for the Protocol on Water and Health to the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes.

In summary, the multi-layered women's civil society network structure can be a useful instrument for horizontal and vertical integration, bridging between different segments and layers in society. By uniting women citizens from different social strata and sectors, the Women's Major Group provides a platform to raise awareness, discuss different opinions and opposing interests, and forge partnerships that jointly address a common problem. Moreover, women's organizations, when empowered and enabled, have the potential to build local ownership and to develop and scale up successful community interventions. Instruments of social dialogue are an intrinsic element of the work of many women's civil society organizations. Social dialogue is used for mobilizing and sensitizing local communities, but it is equally used with the local authorities in the water sector— community interface. It is also practiced at both national and international levels, giving decision-makers a better understanding of realities on the ground.

Bringing successful pilots to scale poses another serious challenge. Small-scale projects that are adapted to local circumstances and take into account cultural differences have proven to be more successful than large-scale projects in many rural areas, for instance, in Armenia. The scaling-up and replication of small-scale, tailor-made projects in decentralised settings is labour intensive and requires social and cultural sensitivity as well as human resources.

Given the sheer size of many developing countries and the large number of rural communities, serious scaling up would be necessary to achieve meaningful results. While scaling potential is considerable and much desired by adjacent local communities, capacity is insufficient, both in terms of time and human resources, but primarily because of financial constraints.

Financial limitations are a generalized and often overwhelming limitation for women's civil society groups. The fact that volunteers may run civil society groups can be misinterpreted as meaning that civil society contributions are free. Even with volunteer staffing, expenses need to be covered. Project management costs and organisation support costs should be taken into account when factoring in civil society participation in projects and activities.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WOMEN-INCLUSIVE WATER COOPERATION

Much of the remaining challenges to provide water security for all lie in rural areas and urban slums of the developing world, where water sources are remote, scarce and/or contaminated, and where customary law prevails, both in terms of water rights and with respect to gender equality and the position of women in public life. These are some of the challenges that need to be addressed in the post-2015 development agenda, given the structural nature of rural-urban disparities in water access, and the social and economic development gaps, generally.

There is mounting evidence that effective water cooperation is helped by a human rights-based approach, which means that the interests of different parties are recognized and the legitimacy and interdependency of the roles of different stakeholders are taken into account. Participation is a key element of the human rights-based approach. While States are the prime duty bearers for providing the basic water needs and their political will is essential, meaningful progress will only be made if other stakeholders join in and fulfil their specific roles. But participation is not a given, especially for marginalized groups that do not have a say in policy decisions that concern them. As such, women's voice, agency, participation, and leadership in the water and sanitation domains should be considered and actively promoted.

A clear definition of roles and responsibilities is needed for the Institutional mechanisms guiding water cooperation. Strengthening institutional mechanisms requires resources and should also include strengthening partnerships with civil society organizations that have complementary roles and expertise. Civil society organizations have the capacity to reach, empower, represent and/or defend vulnerable and socially excluded groups – as well as to trigger change and social innovation. The roles of women's civil society organizations may vary but typically include awareness raising, creating community engagement, coordinating action, monitoring, strengthening women's capacities, bridging between governments and citizens, and influencing decision-making on issues of mutual concern.

Budgets for water and sanitation related programs and projects are often skewed towards infrastructure and do not allocate sufficient resources to the social dimension of water provision and management, notably empowerment, capacity strengthening and local ownership building, which are core elements of women-led projects and indispensable for making decentralized systems function sustainably.

Targeted investments are needed to bring women's civil society organizations to the level and scale that are needed to deliver on the proposed water SDG and targets. The four prerequisites to enable meaningful engagement of women consist, first and foremost, of governments willing to involve women in decision-making processes backed up by valid legislation, policies, and regulations. Secondly, decision-making should be inclusive and on the basis of equality, which means equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men in their different – and similar – roles in society. This is a key element of good governance and a principal responsibility of all levels of government under the human rights based approach. Furthermore, women will be motivated to engage if concrete results may be expected. Providing an enabling environment for women's leadership in water projects will produce manifold results in terms of cost efficiency and sustainability of interventions as well as the spin off for social and economic development. Last but not least, investment needed in the social capital of women's organizations facilitates community involvement and brings to the fore women's skills and leadership that can be effectively used for building and strengthening decentralized water governance.

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