

Summary of the French language conference (in English)

INTRODUCTION

Here are a few figures on the 4 weeks of exchange: Of the 146 people / organisations registered, 52 took part in the exchange, for a total of 80 contributions. The great majority of participants sent one or two messages. Profile of the discussion group: Participants represented a diversity of professions and geographic locations. Regarding the country of origin, contributions came from:

- France, Canada and the United States;
- West, Central, East, and North Africa;
- the Indian Ocean (Madagascar and Comoros);
- the Caribbean;
- Brazil.

The type of structures represented were as much from the private as the public spheres: ministries, donor agencies, universities, laboratories /research centres, associations, networks, documentation centres, resource centres, project offices, collectives, media.

As for the professions and area of intervention represented, a certain balance was achieved, between people working on the issue of gender, on the issue of water, or on both. In addition, their approaches were distributed evenly between technical, social and institutional endeavours, and addressed problems of the North, the South, urban as well as rural.

Expectations expressed by the participants:

These were drawn up generally, for the three rounds of the conference. They addressed information exchange, sharing, and dissemination, and this from three angles:

- New contacts / networks development;
- Reinforcement and comparison of knowledge and skills of each individual from a conceptual, political, methodological and technical stand point;
- Definition of best strategies to ensure the progress of practices related to the involvement of women and men, and thus respond to present and future issues in the water and sanitation sector.

SUMMARY OF THE DEBATES ON THE CONCEPTS OF GENDER AND WATER GENDER

Various definitions were set forth on the notion of gender, and all of them concurred that it was a sociological concept (result of a socialisation), to be differentiated from the notion of sex, which has more to do with biological considerations (acquired at birth): gender refers to the roles a society assigns to men, women, girls and boys, as well as to the existing relationships between these groups. These roles can evolve from one socio-cultural context to another, but also on the basis of an age group, a socio-economical category or an ethnic group one belongs to. Such a definition aims to go beyond the concept according to which the attributes, the 'qualities' distinguishing men from women, would be natural, divine, and therefore immutable.

Gender or women?

A debate has developed on the fact that the gender approach tends to put the stress on women, and that this could explain some confusion among the non-specialists on this issue, when dealing with the distinction between the terms 'sex' and 'gender'. In fact, gender does not only deal with women. On this point, this approach differs from the preceding one in the 1970s, called 'Women in Development', which indeed made the error of focusing only on women, which tended to further marginalize them in their 'traditionally feminine' roles. The Gender and Development approach goes beyond the static vision of women and of society, and proposes a dynamic analysis of the roles and responsibilities both sexes. Translation Some participants pointed out that the translation of terms such as gender, mainstreaming, etc. could be a cause of misunderstanding and confusion as to their use, and result in blockages, since this terminology is imported, and not created from concepts specific to each

language regarding questions of gender. Other contributions stated, to the contrary, that the debate should be placed at a different level than the level of translation (gender as a socio-economical advocacy tool), francophones as well as anglophones were unanimous on the concept's definition. As a matter of fact, this terminology is accepted and used by francophones convinced and familiarised with this issue, but it is nonetheless true that this issue of translation can present an obstacle for non-specialists, and particularly for those that are not in favour of introducing this dimension in the actions.

Gender: politically correct?

Increasingly, development policies mention the gender issue, and some donors have now made it a condition to obtaining funding. However, the recognition and actual involvement of women remains insufficient, not to say invisible. Besides, in case of (downwards) adjustment to the total budget of projects, it is often the funds allocated to this issue that are the first to be done away with. It is therefore appropriate to

wonder if there is today a genuine political will, or whether it is rather an expression of a prevalent 'politically correct' phenomenon.

Is gender a universal concept?

This topic triggered a series of questions around the way to use the gender approach without upsetting the socio-economical organisation in place, or risking to compromise the efficiency and sustainability of actions? Indeed, gender is sometimes perceived as a culturally exogenous and potentially destabilising element. Some people believe the tradition is a pretext, in the light of other initiatives that have important consequences on social life (but that do not have as a central objective the men / women relationship) which do not meet with notable resistance. Such findings lead one to ask if the problem does not lie in the formulation and implementation of the approach itself. A few contributions stressed the fact that this approach was often too conceptual and therefore not easily accessible and usable, too restricting even to enforce, because it is not sufficiently adapted to the local context.

On the issue of the gender approach application to different contexts, the opinions received were not unanimous: some participants stated the problems experienced in the North and the South were different, and required therefore to be addressed differently; others focused on the similarities found between the two regions. Eventually, a consensus of sort was achieved: the gender approach must be global, since the problems it underlines are universal (inequality between men and women).

On the other hand, it is obvious that contexts can vary substantially, not only between North and South countries, but also between the countries within these regions, and sometimes within a particular country. For this reason, there is not a universal solution applicable 'as such', and it is critical to adjust it not just for each country but for each implemented initiative. In the area of water, for instance, the gender and water problematics is recognised as being universal: it deals with the right of all women and men to this resource. But given that each gender's respective roles vary substantially between the North and the South, the debates in the field can only differ greatly on the subject of the implementation of a gender and water approach.

Gender approach / participatory approach

The gender approach comes within a broader process, that of the participatory approach. This latter, though it attempts to involve the populations as a whole in the actions, is often limited to acknowledging in retrospect the absence of women in the policy-development and decision-making processes, even on issues like the issue of water, where they are acknowledged as the main users. The gender approach tries to remedy this problem, thanks to an analysis of each one's roles, interests and needs, in particular of those that are usually marginalized. In this regard, it can be said that this approach represents an advanced stage of the participatory process.

GENDER AND WATER

The issues of the gender and water approach:

Various points of view were expressed on this point. Some people put forward the empowerment of women, seeing water as a gateway to address the issue of gender inequalities. Others stressed the improvement of water management, stating that under no circumstances should such an approach be perceived as a feminist demand, to avoid giving rise to blockages. Yet others tried to reconcile the two visions, pointing out

that both objectives could not be separated, and that they should be addressed from the angle of synergy and transversality, rather than that of hierarchization. It is true that improving water management by using this approach helps to create new social and economical opportunities for the community as a whole.

The slow progress:

A number of factors have been identified as being responsible for slowing the actual involvement of women in water management. To start with, the persistency of 'top-down' models of development, coupled with the fact that the gender and water approach still remains too abstract and in consequence too remote from the reality in the field, were suggested. In second place, this slowness has been attributed to two problems that do not relate directly to the issue of water, but that have serious repercussions on all aspects of social life: women's illiteracy and their absence from the public sphere.

Gender and water links / poverty, class...

All participants agreed to acknowledge the strong link that exists between these various sets of problems. Thus, the gender and water approach could contribute to breaking down some hierarchical barriers, with the intent of improving the access to quality water for all. As well, the link with poverty is two-fold. On the one hand, the relief from the responsibility of having to fetch water allows women to turn to other activities, including income-generating activities. On the other, having better quality water to drink reduces health care expenses, at times absolutely unaffordable for the poorest.

WATER

Different comments on water management were offered. First of all, one participant reminded us that the absence of an organised management of water sources could lead to serious consequences on the structures sustainability (often related to a lack of transparency and availability of the funding for maintenance), and consequently on the supply for the population. Then the question of the existing correlation between the various management levels has been developed: the first level, the level of watersheds, has a major impact on the level of local distribution, located downstream. Therefore, in order to avoid conflicts between the different users and to allow everyone to meet their needs, it seems essential, in both cases, to organise management on a participatory basis.

Water: public interest / economic interest?

Last February, a conference on this topic was held in Porto Alegre. This event engendered many exchanges within our group: access to water is a fundamental right, and its management must remain in the public domain. In reality, privatisation is often accompanied by a price increase that excludes automatically the poorest. At the same time, major issues are taking shape around this question, springing from the unequal power relationship between water multinationals and advocates for sustainable and integrated development. It should however be remembered that water is also an economic interest, due to the fact there is a cost to its production, distribution and management. And since not everyone can buy water at its real value, this is an area where the state must intervene, by setting prices within everyone's reach. The question then will be to determine how a fair water resources distribution can be effected without triggering conflicts, whether at the local or international level, in light of the dual phenomenon of depletion and merchandising, taking place nowadays.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All participants acknowledged the still prevalent absence of women in water management, at all levels, in spite of the fact that they are the main users, and that they demonstrate great mobilisation skills when given the opportunity. Our group was also unanimous about the fact that taking concrete actions to change this situation would help to make water management more efficient and sustainable, while improving other aspects of the socio-economical life of populations. In light of these findings, a number of recommendations have been put forward.

GENDER

- Blockages related to the gender concept and to its implementation are of a socio-cultural nature, and it is therefore on the culture front that solutions should be looked for to overcome the resistance.
- Going beyond the theoretical and intellectual debate on gender and setting the problem in the perspective of development would help to minimise the existing resistance phenomenon with regard to this concept. This concept must be clarified, particularly for people who perceive gender as a threat of power reversal (whereas it is in fact a matter of power sharing) between both sexes. The concept's definitions must clearly set forth that the issue is to improve the lives of people, by strengthening solidarity between men and women, and not to oppose them one to the other. It would also be beneficial to simplify the definitions of this concept, in order to make it more accessible and usable by everyone in the field. Establishing a francophone terminology would help this process.
- A more pragmatic use of the concept is needed, so that the 'fashion-based' stage of this approach can be overcome, and that it can become a concrete mean to improve the projects' efficiency. However, such a process must be developed in collaboration with the population as a whole, so that it can own it. The awareness-raising must thus take place among men as well as among women.
- It is essential to differentiate the conceptual level with the implementation in the field. In the same way, the objectives, expectations, basic principles, definition domains, means and methodologies must be clarified.
- Experience related to gender varies according to the socio-cultural context. The gender methodology must therefore be adapted to take into account these differences. Consequently, the methods of implementation of one and the same concept, gender, will vary, and mutually benefit each other. But the gender approach must be global. It is also a question of strategy: working each one for him/herself results in the scattering the efforts to combat the resistance phenomenon. It is more useful to gather the energies to carry out a co-ordinated action in view of developing the gender and water approach.
- Any project, no matter its scope, calls for an identification and impact assessment (taking into account both women and men), as well as for a flexible planning, that could evolve with the changes taking place during the action implementation. **GENDER AND WATER**
- Given the evolution of consumption during the last century, and more particularly during the last 20 years, the problem of water and its declining supply appears increasingly like a vital issue. It is therefore indispensable to develop management methods that take into account the current and future generations needs. To achieve this, men as well as women must be made aware of the seriousness of the problem, and their equitable involvement is needed in order to ensure the sustainability of this resource.
- At the same time, existing organisational and institutional tools must be modified to allow the actual involvement of all the actors.
- Water is a gateway to improve the social welfare at the individual, household as well as community level. For this reason, it is important that planners take into account the concerns of women and men when they determine the location and the type of equipment. Furthermore, in order to develop a rational water management, the different users' practices and ideas must be analysed (and in particular those of women).
- Given the often differing interests that large scale projects (like dam construction) can give rise to, consensus-building requires a mediator's intervention.
- All too often, discussions on the gender and water issue confine themselves to the role of women in drinking water systems, due to the fact that this is mostly where that they are found (few women become Minister of Hydraulics), but it is mandatory to widen the debate to their involvement in other water issues, and this at all levels.

TRAINING

The development of training and professionalization is the cornerstone of any progress in the area of water management. If practices and mentalities are to evolve, such a process must be taken in consideration from two complementary angles:

- It is of capital importance to allow women to develop new skills, by offering them basic training (literacy, technical and financial management), and by promoting their access to water-related trades (hydraulics engineering, decision-making).

- Training and awareness-raising concerning the gender and water approach must be developed for the sector's professionals, be they men or women.
- To change this unequal situation, the result of collective unconscious and of a patriarchal society model, mentalities must change, and this also entails the education of girls and boys.

For further information about this activity, please contact the coordinator of the activity group:

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