

ET13

# Gender and Natural Resource Management

## Key Points:

- 1** Women play key yet undervalued and less visible roles in NRM collection
- 2** The interests of men and women regarding NRM may not coincide
- 3** Government recognition of the importance of women for NRM is limited
- 4** Donor support for women in NRM often does not go beyond lip-service

This Briefing is one of a series produced jointly by the Forum for Social Studies (Ethiopia), Centro de Experimentação Florestal (Mozambique) and the University of Sussex (UK). Each is designed to summarise research findings and encourage feedback. The Briefing is part of the 'Marena' research project, funded by the UK's Department for International Development.

Gender relations are important to natural resource management (NRM) in Ethiopia for two main reasons. First, the gender division of labour and access to resources influences the nature of NRM activities. Second, interventions to promote NRM can result in important differences in wellbeing between men and women.

While male and female interests with regard to environmental management are often compatible, this is not always the case. Thus, a sensitive institutional understanding of gender relations is critical. In Ethiopia, this is still rare.

This *Briefing* outlines the relationship between gender and NRM issues then assesses the policy response by both government and donors.

## Gender and NRM

As elsewhere in Africa, women in Ethiopia take principal responsibility for domestic activities. Of these, the collection of fuel and water are both time consuming and dependent on the natural environment. Degradation of firewood and water supplies thus has a direct effect on women's workload. Although there is flexibility in this gender division of labour, evidence suggests that the majority of the burden of natural resource collection is borne by women.

However, unlike many other parts of Africa, the gender division of labour in agriculture leads to a lower visibility of women's work in farming. The central role of female farmers in Africa is now widely recognised by developers. But this is less the case in Ethiopia. Being largely plough-based, in the north there is a reliance on male labour, which is not the case in hoe-based systems. As a result, there is a strong perception among both government and donors that Ethiopian farmers are male. Such a perception obscures the important contributions that women do make, especially to weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processing.

## Discrimination against women

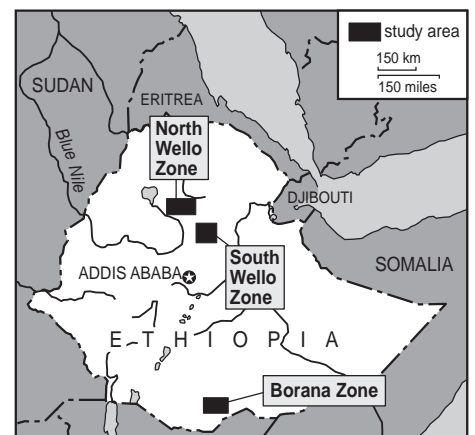
Although officially women and men are both able to own land, women suffer specific problems of tenure insecurity, particularly when widowed or left alone because of the conscription or long term migration of their husbands. This is especially serious when there is competition for limited land as in Wello.

For example, it is apparently common for women to be 'encouraged' to give up their land, or enter into sharecropping arrangements if left to head households alone. The argument is that they would be unable to farm without male labour, but there is reportedly a long-term strategy of uprooting such women (see *Briefing* ET08).

## Official responses: the state

It is extremely unusual to find a woman in a position of influence at any level in the Ethiopian government. This fact, coupled with prevailing views which restrict women to the private sphere, probably contributes to the very partial way that gender issues have been incorporated into policy and practice. For representatives of the government, the willingness and capacity to take on board issues of gender varies. A need to understand gender relations is however, usually translated to attention to women.

For example, the government agricultural extension service has been attempting to recruit female extension agents. Yet, the



majority of the men charged with doing this argue that women are unable to cope physically with the work, and that male farmers will be unhappy to be visited by a woman. They thus suggest that women would do better to concentrate on improved wood stoves and home economics activities.

## Donors' policy and practices

Government resistance is in strong contrast to the attention officially given to issues of gender in donor policy. For example:

- The Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA)'s project in Amhara region devotes a large amount of its training budget to gender planning. Consultative exercises are carried out with men, women, and youth separately.
- Participatory planning exercises by the World Food Programme (WFP) demand that a local committee of nine people should have at least three women in it.
- SOS-Sahel, a British NGO working to improve community participation in environmental management, emphasises the need for gender sensitivity.

However, putting these principles into practice remains difficult. SIDA works closely with the government, but no amount of gender training can overcome the fact that the regional gender office is staffed by only five people. The scheme also encounters all the resistance discussed above.

SOS-Sahel's concern may also be more rhetorical than real. For example, PRA work undertaken when the agency first arrived produced an undifferentiated picture of rural

wealth, or religion. Reference was made to 'the average family' disguising important differences within households. This approach is then replicated in project activities.

### **Gender User Rights and PLUPI**

SOS-Sahel's user rights approach related to their participatory land use planning and implementation (PLUPI) methodology has generally been hailed as a success. Groups of farmers are ensured titles to enclosed land through the issuance of user rights certificates. Trees are planted and protected as a cash crop.

The only negative aspect noted in evaluations is that women complain they have reduced access to firewood. In this case, male and female interests, even those within the same household, apparently do not coincide.

WFP's soil and water conservation activities as part of food-for-work are also not as gender balanced as intended. WFP concedes that quotas for numbers of women on planning committees are not met, and that the monitoring and evaluation of work is almost entirely carried out by men. In some places, women also receive half as much food as men for equal work.

The welfare outcomes of these facts are less clear. One study<sup>1</sup> suggests that food is often collected by men for work done by women, and that the difference between official figures, and who actually does what, is quite dramatic.

## Concluding comments

The problems in supporting NRM activities which take into account the interests of both men and women are not peculiar to Ethiopia. However, the particularities of the farming environment, the effects of conflict, and the influence of tenure insecurity, create specific challenges.

Both donor agencies and government tend to pay little more than lip service to these challenges. An improvement will involve comprehension of the complexities of gender relations rather than a simple focus on women. However, if such comprehension includes recognition that male and female interests do not coincide, difficult strategic decisions about the prioritisation of resources may need to be taken.

<sup>1</sup>Tadella Demeke, 1997. Women's participation in project planning. A review of a WFP supported food-for-work in Ethiopia.

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