

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and motivation

The South African national water policy and legislative framework is under-pinned by the principle of equity with reference to racial and gender equity. This puts an obligation on government to ensure that the past imbalances to the access and control of water resources are redressed as a priority. It recognizes the importance of women's voices in water management structures. To put this to effect, the National Water Act of 1998 makes provision for the establishment of Water User Associations (WUAs) as vehicles for achieving poverty reduction and gender equity. It is believed that the participation of women in water management could improve their status by giving them a voice in decisions on use and allocation of water resources. To fulfil the legislative requirement for equitable gender participation, the Minister of Water Affairs & Forestry has set a 50% quota for women's representation in Management Committees (MANCO) of WUAs.

This study was initiated to investigate practical steps that have been taken by the government to create an enabling environment for women's participation in MANCO of WUAs. This should be demonstrated by enhancing women's access to land and water rights since these natural resources are essential for productive use of water and improvement in livelihoods of the poor men and women. The voting power within the WUAs was determined by the ownership of water rights, therefore, members who did not own any water rights could not influence decisions on water use and allocation and most women belong to this category. The study hypothesized that gender quotas alone were not adequate to redress the past gender imbalances. The study hence assessed the level of women's representation in Management Committees of WUAs, their contribution to decision-making and benefits that accrue to women that are members of WUAs.

Objective

The overall objective of the study is to assess gender equity within the management committees of Water User Associations (WUAs) and to make recommendations for ensuring that participation of women in WUAs contributes to their social and economic empowerment.

Scope of the study

The study has assessed gender equity in 6 WUAs in Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal provinces. It was not possible to include more WUAs because the research was

conducted concurrently with a DWAF project on the development of Business Plans for WUAs and interviews of members of the WUAs were linked to DWAF funded workshops.

Limitations

The study was limited to two provinces; therefore, it does not reflect a national picture of the challenges faced by female members of WUAs. However, the experiences of poor rural women that are members of Water Associations are expected to be similar nationally.

Methodology

A literature review of international and national experience on gender equity within the water resources management sector was conducted and the focus of the review was on the status of women in the irrigation sector. A gender analysis of a selection of WUAs in South Africa was undertaken to assess the level of female representation in MANCOs of these WUAs.

The following WUAs participated in the study: Mutale, Mutshimbwe, Nzhelele, Middle Letaba (Limpopo), Bushmans River and Imfunda YoPhongola (KZN).

The following research instruments were used to collect data:

- A survey questionnaire was used to assess women's perceptions of their contribution to decision-making and benefits enjoyed by female members of WUAs. Obstacles and challenges they face were also assessed.
- A semi-structured interview schedule was used to assess how the chairpersons of MANCOs of WUAs perceived the contribution of women to the decision-making processes of the MANCOs of WUAs and their views on special interventions that were required to empower women within the WUAs.
- A semi-structured interview schedule was used to assess the perceptions of DWAF officials on the contribution of women to decision-making processes of MANCOs of WUAs and their views on interventions that were needed to achieve gender equity.
- Semi-structured questions were used to interview gender practitioners to elicit their views on the approaches that must be adopted to ensure that women's participation in MANCOs of WUAs contribute to their social and economic empowerment.

Face-to-face interviews were used in most cases and where this was not possible telephonic and electronic interviews were used.

Main conclusions

The findings of the study supported the hypothesis that gender quotas alone were not enough to bring about gender equity and poverty reduction in WUAs because the required enabling environment for the empowerment of rural women was not created. Although the water and gender equality policy and legislative framework clearly outlined steps that must be taken to redress past gender imbalances, the decision-makers have focussed on increasing the representation of women in management structures without implementing the necessary programmes for empowerment of women. The study showed that women were not getting any benefits from their involvement in WUAs because they did not own land and water rights in their individual capacity. Men who owned land and water rights had the power to influence the decisions on the allocation of water resources. Women interviewed for the study indicated that their participation in MANCO of WUAs had provided them with an opportunity to learn about the water resources management and they also learned from the experience of other members of MANCO.

The following specific conclusions were drawn from the research findings:

Policy and legislative framework for gender equality

- The study showed that the democratic government of South Africa had put in place very well thought out policies and legislation for creating a gender equitable society but there was a problem in the understanding and translating of these policies into practice.
- The top-down approach of establishing WUAs for poor black farmers was not in line with the vision of the National Water Act which envisaged a bottom-up process driven by water users.
- There was a general lack of understanding of the concept of gender equality and gender mainstreaming within government departments which led to a narrow focus on gender quotas without creating the enabling environment for women to succeed.
- The lack of a coordinated gender strategy and specific budgets allocated for the implementation of gender equity in WUAs demonstrated a lack of commitment to gender mainstreaming at the highest levels of government.

Literature review

- International experience showed that women and men had different perceptions of poverty. Men perceived poverty as a lack of assets and ability to generate income, while women's indicators of poverty were food insecurity and poor health. This demonstrated the importance of designing poverty reduction programmes that cater for these gender differences.
- Women lacked capacity and skills needed to influence decisions on water resources management because of the historical exclusion of women from ownership and control of water and land resources.

Gender representation in MANCOs of WUAs

A gender analysis of selected WUAs showed that none had achieved the 50% gender quota required by the Minister. The new WUAs for poor black farmers had made an effort to increase the number of women because gender equity was a condition for them to access subsidies for poor farmers while transformed irrigation boards which were self-sustaining had no incentive to include women in their management structures.

Patriarchy as an obstacle to gender equity

Contrary to the literature and perceptions of DWAF coordinators and gender practitioners, patriarchy did not seem to be a major problem anymore for the female members of WUAs in Limpopo province. However, in KZN, patriarchy was cited as a constraint to effective participation of women in MANCO of WUAs. Land rights under the communal land tenure system were still linked to husbands, fathers, brothers or sons, therefore, women as individuals were not entitled to these rights.

Weak institutional arrangements

The top-down approach followed in the establishment of the new WUAs for poor black farmers was not aligned with the vision of the NWA which envisaged a user driven process whereby water users would define the organizational structure based on their needs. The CMAs were supposed to provide support to WUAs but currently there were no functional CMAs that could provide guidance to the WUAs and DWAF did not have the capacity to provide the support to fill this institutional gap. The new WUAs were not functional because of a lack of institutional support and there were no support programmes for poor women and men so that they could access resources necessary to participate in productive use of water. Unlike the transformed

irrigation boards, these new WUAs could not be self-sustaining without government funding because of poor resourcing.

Poor cooperative governance

The vision of new WUAs as vehicles for poverty reduction required effective cooperative governance at all levels of the government system but this was currently not in place. The lack of formal structures for collaboration and coordination of relevant national government departments at the local level and through the vertical spheres of government – local, regional, provincial and national – in the support for the poor black farmers continued to perpetuate the marginalization of the poor rural men and women. There were also no clear processes to ensure accountability of government officials.

Lack of enabling environment for gender mainstreaming

The gender policies were not supported with strategies and guidelines for mainstreaming gender in water management institutions. There were no special budgets allocated to the support of the meaningful participation of women in management structures of WUAs, for example, all women interviewed for this study cited lack of money for transport to attend the meetings of WUAs as a constraint.

No special capacity building and training programmes were initiated to prepare women for their new leadership roles. The Land Reform Programme did not have any special programmes for targeting women as beneficiaries either and the Department of Land Affairs did not have statistics on land transferred to women. The Commission for Gender Equality and Office of the Status of Women did not have adequate capacity to support government departments in the implementation of their progressive gender equality policies. The lack of an enabling environment for empowerment of women could raise a question on the government's commitment to gender equality.

Monitoring and Evaluation

There were no performance indicators for gender equity in MANCOs of WUAs and DWAF. There was a need for gender equality indicators that were not limited to gender quotas but also measured tangible impacts of the national water policy and legislation on the improvement in the quality of life for poor women who were members of WUAs.

Recommendations

Water policy and legislative framework

There was a need to promote a bottom-up process in the establishment of WUAs for poor black farmers so that the members could take ownership of these institutions. DWAF and its partners should facilitate the process and provide resources necessary to make these institutions viable.

Empowerment of women

- The gender quotas must be coupled with specific capacity building programmes that address leadership and technical skills necessary to empower women to fulfil their roles in MANCO of WUAs.
- Government departments should fast-track women's access to land and water rights in their respective mandates so that women could become independent farmers.
- A coordinated strategy for gender equity in Water User Associations must be developed and adequate resources must be allocated for implementing the strategy and suitable performance indicators should be developed for monitoring progress in the achievement of a gender equitable society.
- Processes must be put in place to provide poor women and other marginalized groups with information on their rights and channels to be followed to report violation of these rights.

Weak institutional arrangements

- There was a need to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the different government departments in the provision of support to WUAs whilst the CMAs remain non-functional.
- The successful partnerships between WUAs and municipalities demonstrated in some WUAs in assisting the poor black farmers to get access to land and water, should be encouraged.
- Implementation of effective cooperative governance processes at all levels of government should be enforced to support the operation of WUAs as vehicles of poverty reduction according the water policy vision.
- The water allocation reform programme should be linked to the land reform programme and resources should be provided to support poor men and women in the use of water for agricultural production.

Poor understanding and interpretation of gender policy

The poor understanding and interpretation of gender policy by senior management in government departments and MANCOs of WUAs must be addressed in a two-pronged approach through the provision of gender awareness training for senior managers in government and members of MANCO and the supporting of specific programmes for empowering women to demand their right to gender equality as enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa.

Further research

The following research must be conducted:

- Development of co-operative governance models for effective use of WUAs as vehicles for poverty reduction for poor rural women and men.
- Investigation of alternative models for improving the socio-economic status of poor rural women other than through becoming members of WUAs.

Concluding remarks

The study has concluded that the primary focus of gender mainstreaming should be on changing the mindset of both men and women so that they could recognize that women have an important role to play in addressing the poverty challenge faced by poor rural communities in South Africa. The historical racial and gender inequalities have led to a situation where poor rural black women were the most disadvantaged group in our society. Their low education levels, poor access to information and lack of knowledge prevented them from participating meaningfully in democratic processes. Therefore any initiative that aims to promote gender equality must ensure that these constraints were removed, otherwise the poor rural women would continue to be passive members of committees recruited to meet gender quotas.

KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION

The findings of this study will be shared with DWAF-National and DWAF-Regional in the two participating provinces so that they can take the necessary action to address some of the obstacles that are hindering meaningful participation of women in MANCOs of WUAs. A paper on this research will be prepared and submitted for publication in an appropriate journal. The accompanying full research report will be published to facilitate dissemination of the research findings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the Water Research Commission for funding this study.

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the organizations and individuals who made a contribution to the study, in particular,

- Chairpersons of WUAs that participated in the study;
- emale members of WUAs for their participation in the surveys;
- Gender practitioners for sharing their knowledge and experience with us;
- DWAF officials for their valuable inputs into the study.
- Ms Eiman Karar, WRC, for her guidance.