

# Gender and desertification

Making ends  
meet in drylands



Enabling poor rural people to overcome poverty



# Desertification and rural poverty

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Desertification is the process of land degradation that affects dryland areas and is caused by poverty, unsustainable land management and climate change. Drylands lose their productive capacity in a spiral of destruction that twins increased land degradation with increased poverty and food insecurity. Drought and desertification threaten the livelihoods of more than 1.2 billion people in 110 countries. The problem is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia.

Land degradation leads to greater competition for the increasingly scarce resources upon which rural communities depend for their livelihoods and survival. Its impact is exacerbated by poor people's lack of access to

## Different roles and coping strategies

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Women and men have different roles and needs, and often their access to land, water and other assets is not equal. Men are usually the landowners, managing cash crops and other high-earning natural resources. Women are usually responsible for the plots on which food crops are grown and for obtaining water and firewood for their families.

In areas affected by desertification, as soil fertility decreases and crop and livestock productivity decline, the lack of income often forces men to leave their communities in search of employment. Women become de facto heads of households. They assume responsibilities traditionally held by men, but they do not have equal access to community services, decision-making power, and financial, technological and other resources. Their already heavy workload becomes even more burdensome.

## Reducing poverty by promoting gender equality

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Lessons from IFAD-supported projects show that both women and men benefit from a gender approach that reinforces their joint participation in restoring the productivity of degraded land, and ensures that women are involved in planning and carrying out dryland development activities.

Efforts to reduce poverty and introduce sustainable management of land and water resources have benefited from recognition of women's unique capabilities and their role as the main providers of food security for their families.

Women often hold important knowledge. Their experience and understanding of the local environment and of plants, medicines, food, water and other resources is an important community asset.

Women's organizations have proven to be effective vehicles for improving food security and community-based management of natural resources. Such organizations address and improve women's access to:

- land use and tenure
- water rights
- livestock production
- credit and financial services
- markets and transportation
- agricultural extension services
- participation in decision-making and community development

Improved capacity-building that takes gender differences into account has been found to be more sustainable, providing long-term advantages to communities.

social and productive assets, services, credit and technology. About 70 per cent of IFAD's rural poverty reduction projects are located in ecologically fragile, marginal environments.

Sustainable land use and water management, and reduction of poverty are crucial to counteracting the impact of drought and desertification.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) stresses a "bottom-up" participatory approach that directly involves women and men in strategies to rehabilitate and restore their natural resources.

When communities adopt strategies to increase soil productivity and ensure equal access by men and women to agricultural extension services, technology and rural finance, the benefits are sustainable and become a public good.

## Case studies

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### Brazil

#### **Involving women in water users' committees**

In connection with IFAD's strategy of building the organizational capacities of rural poor people, water users' committees in the Rio Gavião Region of Brazil were required to take in women members. Women play a crucial role in ensuring the water supply to their houses, and they have comprised almost half the participants in environmental training courses. Training and other measures to improve secure access to water have contributed to a significant increase in the supply of water available for use in the home and for livestock, alleviating the workloads of women and young people.

### China

#### **Reducing indigenous women's workloads**

A joint IFAD-World Food Programme initiative, the Wulin Mountains Minority-Areas Development Project, reduced women's workloads by introducing time-saving technologies and improving drinking water supply systems, which also enhanced health and hygiene. An emphasis on organic farming to rebuild soil productivity and conversion of dryland to paddies increased cash crop and food production. Small livestock husbandry provided additional income for food, school fees and clothing. The programme's success helped increase women's self-esteem and enhanced their social position in the community.

### Mauritania

#### **Couples as effective agricultural extension agents**

The IFAD-financed Oasis Development Project in Mauritania focused on the exchange of knowledge between local farming couples and Moroccan farming couples who travelled to a Mauritanian oasis to work for several months as extension agents. This exchange addressed men and women differently. They learned water conservation technologies, and new techniques and skills to apply to irrigation, vegetable gardening, traditional crafts and baking in order to diversify their incomes and reduce their vulnerability.



# IFAD: addressing the links between land degradation and poverty

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IFAD is a specialized agency of the United Nations dedicated to eradicating rural poverty in developing countries. Over the past 25 years IFAD has committed over US\$3.5 billion to support dryland development and to combat land degradation. IFAD hosts the Global Mechanism, the system set up to mobilize resources and implement the 1994 UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

IFAD is also an executing agency of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), an independent financial organization that provides grants to developing countries to promote environmental programmes and sustainable livelihoods in local communities. In addition, IFAD hosts the International Land Coalition, dedicated to improving rural poor people's access to land and natural resources.

The UN General Assembly declared 2006 the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, launching an interagency committee that brings together the principal institutional partners of the UN active in the UNCCD implementation process, including IFAD.

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## LINKS

<http://www.ifad.org/gender/index.htm>



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