Common Ground

Women’s Access to Natural Resources and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals

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Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)

Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) is an international advocacy organization that seeks to increase the power of women worldwide as policymakers at all levels in governments, institutions and forums to achieve economic and social justice, a healthy and peaceful planet, and human rights for all.

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A Driving Force for Change

Women’s survival, and that of their households and communities, depends on access to and control of natural resources—land, water, forests and plants. Every day women and girls walk long distances to bring water and fuel to their families. Women perform the majority of the world’s agricultural work, producing food for their families, as well as other goods that are sold in national and international markets. Over generations, women have developed in-depth knowledge of the uses and care of medicinal plants. Women have learned to manage these resources in order to preserve them for future generations. Yet, women’s access to and control of these resources is far from guaranteed.

Traditional gender roles assigning different responsibilities to women and men have resulted in political, cultural and economic barriers that restrict women’s access to natural resources. For example, women are frequently excluded from decision-making. Community leaders may not invite women to meetings on resource use, or expect only the men present to voice their concerns. Lower levels of literacy and education among women may further restrict their participation.

Government and institutional policies often fail to recognize the importance of women’s access to natural resources. While research has shown that agricultural productivity increases significantly when women farmers have access to land and technology, women own less than two percent of all land. Without secure land tenure, women are further excluded from community decision-making and are unable to secure credit.

Women’s actions from the local village to the global policy-making arenas are a driving force for change. From the 1975 UN international Year on Women, through the Decade on Women (1976–1985) and the global conferences and summits of the 1990s, women participated actively to shape economic, social, political, and sustainable development.

Throughout the 1990s, WEDO and other women’s organizations struggled to put gender on the global policy agenda at key United Nations international conferences, including the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio, 1992), the International Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, Austria, 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, Egypt, 1994), and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, China, 1995).

The result has been a far-reaching global policy agenda that promotes women’s equal rights and empowerment. Despite these gains, implementation of these global commitments has lagged in many areas, including women’s access to natural resources.

At the 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit, 191 governments reaffirmed their commitment to women’s empowerment and adopted the Millennium Declaration, agreeing to “promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.” The Declaration also addresses “the equal rights and opportunities of women and men” and pledges to “combat all forms of violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).”
The following year, the Secretary General put forward eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that contain 18 numerical and time-bound targets and 48 indicators intended to improve living conditions and remedy major global imbalances by 2015. Included are some of the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in the Platform for Action adopted at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing—namely poverty, education, health and environmental sustainability.

For women advocates, the MDGs are a set of minimal goals that are necessary, but not sufficient, for human development. They do not represent the full vision of gender equity, equality and women’s empowerment or poverty eradication and structural transformation envisaged in UN conferences and human rights instruments. Nor do they reflect the broad, universal reach of these commitments but only the most basic requirements of the Least Developed Countries.

Nonetheless, the time-bound targets offer an avenue of engagement to women advocates monitoring the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and other key international policy agreements of the 1990s. The MDGs, with their high level of international consensus, also offer the possibility of tackling multiple issues at once, and in an integrated manner. For example, reducing poverty by half (goal 1) or improving access to water and sanitation (goal 7) cannot be achieved without an understanding of women’s distinct roles and needs (goal 3).

Mobilization around the globally set benchmarks in the MDGs offers an opportunity for women’s groups, gender advocates, NGOs, UN agencies, government and other institutions to advance gender equality as a key strategy for achieving these goals.

This booklet demonstrates how linking MDGs 1, 3, and 7 that focus on poverty eradication, gender equality and environmental sustainability can expand women’s access to natural resources. It illustrates, through grassroots initiatives and real life examples, the linkages between poverty eradication, women’s empowerment and natural resources and provides strategies, tools and actions for women’s groups, NGOs, UN agencies, governments and other institutions to integrate gender issues and women’s participation in the MDG process. Finally, this booklet contains resources for finding out more about the MDG process and women’s access to natural resources.
In most parts of the world, women and girls are responsible for collecting water for cooking, cleaning, health and hygiene, and if they have access to land, growing food. Increasingly limited water supplies, poor service delivery, pollution, growing population pressure and privatization are jeopardizing women’s survival and that of their families. Under MDG 7, governments agreed to halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2015. If women are to be targeted effectively, governments must link their efforts to MDG 3 on gender equality and women’s empowerment. Improvement of water services can only come about when women have a stake in decision-making so that their needs are met. Linking these goals will also further efforts toward poverty eradication, MDG 1.

KENYA Eight years ago, most women living in the Kirinyaga district in Kenya collected water three or four kilometers away from their homes or purchased it expensively from water sellers. Water scarcity made reliable agriculture impossible, while waterborne diseases were rampant. Women also faced other problems such as a lack of access to education and decision-making in community affairs.

An earlier self-help water project in the area, which had excluded women, failed to deliver water due to mismanagement. In response, the local women came together and formed the Kugeria Women’s Group to improve their living standards by securing access to safe, affordable and reliable water.

Determined to get water into their homes, the women’s group requested support from the Ministry of Water Development to conduct a survey to establish what would be required to deliver water from the River Kuye, 11 kilometers away. The group then requested funding and technical assistance from Africa 2000 Network, an initiative set up by the United Nations Development Programme to foster environmentally sensitive poverty reduction policies. They also went on exchange visits to other water projects run by women in the country, to share experiences and seek solutions to their specific problems.

Today, Kugeria Women’s Group members have succeeded in bringing a water supply to 300 families, by learning the skills necessary to build and maintain a water system. Sanitation has improved, leading to a drastic reduction in waterborne diseases and the time spent looking for water is now used for agricultural production. The community also uses the new water supply for irrigation and people no longer have to depend on food handouts during drought.

There have been other gains for the Kugeria women and their community. Women have become leaders, moving from bare survival to contribution. Project management training for women’s groups has helped to ensure the sustainability of this venture and it has resulted in further community development initiatives, including the building of a clinic and the provision of family planning services to their community.

Adapted from “Success Stories: Gender and the Environment.” The Kugeria Women Water Project Case Study. UNEP, 2000, Page 30-35.
Access to energy sources—whether for lighting, cooking, food processing, or other life-sustaining uses—is critical to poverty eradication. Women in developing countries are often the primary collectors of household fuel, spending long hours in the search. They are forced to travel farther and work harder when fuel wood or charcoal becomes scarce. The availability of energy for lighting in the home also affects female education and literacy, and offers extended working hours for income generation. These interrelated issues show the importance of creating national policies that improve women’s access to energy, developing gender-sensitive technologies, protecting the environment and ensuring women’s participation in decision-making. This approach will help to meet MDG 3 on promoting gender equality as well as MDG 2 on universal primary education and MDG 7 on ensuring sustainability.

**Malawi** In Malawi, household use of wood and charcoal for fuel, as well as land clearing for agricultural expansion, has resulted in serious deforestation. About 90 percent of the country’s energy demand is met using wood fuels gathered from natural woodlands and forest plantations, many of which are state owned.

To provide alternative sources of energy, and reduce people’s dependence on charcoal for fuel while allowing the Ndirande mountain reserve to regenerate, a project was initiated in 1998 by the Nkhomano Development Centre, a non-governmental organization, with support from the Canadian Government. The aim was to produce briquettes from wood and paper wastes, agricultural residues and other biomass materials enabling women to earn incomes while simultaneously promoting waste management.

Since Malawi’s multi-party general elections in 1994, political commitment and support for women’s rights and participatory democracy had increased, creating an environment conducive to the project’s goals. In addition, a gender policy was adopted in 1999 as a means of ensuring that grassroots women and men benefit equally from development activities.

Under the briquette project, women were active in choosing the type and design of technology. The result was wooden briquette-making machines designed especially for women producers. The machines require only a small capital investment, minimum physical effort, and can be locally maintained. The strategic location of the project in a city suburb meant that there was a readily available market for the briquettes beyond household use, for needs such as food vending and small-scale businesses that depend on portable energy sources.

Women have benefited from access to a source of energy, income generation, and reduced time and distances traveled to obtain fuel. Women also reported that they have benefited socially because they have more time for their families and domestic work.

Other benefits included slowed deforestation, some regeneration of the Ndirande forest reserve, a high level of awareness of the impacts of deforestation and the reduction of the city’s costs for waste collection and disposal.

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**International Commitments on Energy**

  Paras: 16; 18; 9; 20(m)

If not enough work has been done to inform and educate the government and the general public, a court’s decision might not be enforced or could be overturned by new legislation.

**Tanzania** In *Ephrohim v. Pastory*, a woman brought a court challenge to the Haya customary law that prevented her from selling clan land. Holaria Pastory had inherited land from her father, through his will. But when she tried to sell it, her nephew applied to have the sale voided. Tanzania’s Declaration of Customary Law prohibited her sale of the land in its rules of inheritance, which states that “women can inherit, except for clan land, which they may receive in usufruct but may not sell.” Pastory argued that this violated the constitution’s Bill of Rights. The court relied on the Government’s ratification of CEDAW, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, to find that women were constitutionally protected from discrimination, overruling customary law. The court stated that “the principles enunciated in the above named documents are a standard below which any civilized nation will be ashamed to fall.”

**Nepal** In *Dhungana v. Nepal*, the Forum for Women, Law and Development asked the Supreme Court to overturn a law that gave sons a share of ancestral property at birth but denied daughters a share until they reached the age of 35 without having married, and even then required that the land be returned to the family if a daughter subsequently married. Because the Convention has the status of national law in Nepal, the case was argued both as a violation of the Convention and as a violation of the constitution’s equality guarantee. The Supreme Court found that the law discriminated against women and directed the Nepalese Government to “introduce an appropriate Bill to parliament within one year.”

**International Commitments on Land**


Biodiversity is the total number of species in a region, forming an intricate web that makes life itself possible. Not only do a variety of plants and animals provide immediate sources for human medicines and food, biodiversity also improves water quality, reduces flooding, and absorbs and cleans wastes. But increasing pressures on the environment, such as higher demands on resources due to population growth, threaten biodiversity. Under MDG 7, which seeks to sustain the environment, biodiversity is a priority, but successfully managing the natural resource base will also require examining gender inequities, human needs, population growth, and economic pressures and opportunities. Governments seeking to meet the challenges of MDG 7 will have to tackle multiple issues at once.

**Kenya** On Lamu, an island city on Kenya’s coast near the Kiunga National Marine Reserve with about 75,000 inhabitants, the population is growing by some 2.2 percent per year. Along the East African coast, the population continues to grow 5 to 6 percent per year, a result of large family size and migration to coastal cities where job opportunities are abundant. On Lamu, however, salaried jobs for men are few, and for women, they are practically non-existent. Poverty is deepening and the lack of electricity and running water remains unaddressed. Access to health services or education beyond primary school is limited, especially for women and girls.

Nearly all of the 14,000 people living within the boundaries of the Kiunga Reserve or just outside them rely heavily on its natural resources. Local residents and migrants are intensifying the pressure as they struggle to meet their needs. In Kiunga’s waters, the supplies of fish, crustaceans, ocean-dwelling coral, and turtles are showing signs of depletion as people pushed by poverty apply new fishing methods to increase their catch. Much of Kenya’s coast south of Kiunga has been “fished out.” Just beyond the coastal mangroves, large numbers of trees have been reduced to stumps to make way for agriculture. Their loss contributes to soil erosion and to silt being deposited in the ocean waters, and will make it hard in future years for women to find wood for cooking and heating. Efforts to integrate issues of population, gender, and sustainability must target areas of high biodiversity, like Lamu, for improvements in reproductive health, education, and women’s rights to participate in natural resource management.

**Laos** In Laos, changing legislation related to conservation of forested areas has restricted women’s access to timber and non-timber forest products that are vital for their subsistence and cash income, throwing up roadblocks to access to forest products like cardamom, benzoin, eaglewood, rattan, tree bark and medicinal plants. The new land use and forest zoning policies have turned large parts of what used to be village territory into state territory. The unexpected effect is that outsiders are allowed to remove plants from those reserved zones without the villagers’ knowledge or ability to stop them. Without alternatives for income and domestic use, women have to go even deeper into the forest to collect the same quantity of forest products, while running the risk of receiving fines. The result is that even if prices and domestic needs remain stable, a woman earns or obtains less per hour of work. The legislation, as it is understood and implemented at the local level, impoverishes the women and their families, increases their workload and does not protect natural resources. Ethnic minority women are hardest hit, facing increased poverty and hardship and losing their central role in sustaining forest biodiversity. National legislation should be changed to make sure the local villages and, in particular, the women have biodiversity rights on village territory.


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**International Commitments on Biodiversity**


**World Summit on Sustainable Development, Rio+10, Johannesburg, 2002.** [www.johannesburgsummit.org. Paras: 13, 16, 17 (k); 18.]
Mobilizing Involvement

Advocates for gender equality and women’s empowerment can play an important role in holding their governments accountable for reaching the Millennium Development Goals. This section provides strategies, tools and actions for making gender equality central, not only to goals 1, 3, and 7 on poverty eradication, gender equality, and environmental sustainability, but to all eight goals.

Areas of Engagement

All governments are required to report on national progress toward the MDGs. However, in many country reports thus far, gender has been marginalized and restricted to the goals related to gender equality and health. All country reports submitted in 2003 failed to mention gender in relation to goal 7 on environmental sustainability. Few governments set actions for target 9 on integrating the principles of sustainable development and reversing the loss of environmental resources. Advocates should collaborate with states on their national MDG implementation plans to incorporate gender and women’s access to natural resources. National reporting can also include progress on targets set in other international agreements and conventions such as the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the 2002 Johannesburg Programme of Implementation, and build on legally binding human rights mechanisms such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

To further implementation of the MDGs, the United Nations has created task forces that provide expertise and background papers for each of the goals. Advocates have been urging the task forces to include analysis of how women’s empowerment and gender equality is central to poverty eradication and environmental sustainability.

Most critically, the indicators for measuring the progress toward the MDGs must be expanded at all levels. In contrast to broad targets, indicators provide a specific numerical measure for achieving development goals, for example the number of women who gained access to water or land in a specific geographic area. While the UN has identified global targets and indicators for each of the MDGs, these are limited. Governments, in consultation with women’s organizations, should develop gender-focused targets and indicators that are tailored to the national context.

Achieving the MDGs will require substantial investment of resources by donor countries and a facilitating macroeconomic framework, acknowledged in goal 8 which seeks to develop a global partnership for development. The MDGs are intended to be closely linked to poverty reduction strategies, which the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund directed 70 of the poorest countries to develop. Many of these national strategies lack a gender approach, however. Activists should monitor progress by industrialized countries and financial institutions in meeting these goals, and whether gender and women’s access to resources is being incorporated.
Gender Review Process  
Country reports should go through a gender review process before they are finalized. This would enable women’s organizations and others to actively engage in the monitoring process and to advocate for indicators that recognize the needs of women and poor communities. Independent shadow reports can also be created to monitor what governments say they are doing and what is actually being done.

National Toolkits on Gender Indicators  
Countries and UN agencies, in consultation with women’s organizations, should compile a list of national indicators related to gender equality and women’s empowerment, as well as specific indicators to measure women’s access to and control of natural resources. This would enable women’s organizations to identify the factors most critical to achieving the MDGs in each country.

Gender Budget Initiatives  
Gender-responsive budget initiatives, which are currently underway in over 50 countries, analyze the differential impact of specific policies and budget allocations on women and men. This tool has been used by women’s organizations and governments to improve accountability and targeting of public services. Gender budget initiatives are especially useful in incorporating gender into sectors not always associated with women—including transportation, industry and natural resources.
Actions that Count

Whether your government has already submitted its first Country Report or has not yet elaborated its national plan for MDG implementation, you can help ensure that gender equality and women’s empowerment are on the agenda.

1 **Get the Facts** Contact your ministry of foreign affairs or national United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) office to find out who is preparing your country’s MDG implementation plan and country report.

2 **Strategize** Use the tools in this publication to mainstream gender into national MDG implementation plans and to challenge country reports.

3 **Demand Accountability** Is women’s empowerment being left behind? Publicize it, criticize it, work with other relevant national and regional groups to put political pressure on your government.

4 **Lobby** Target elected officials and community leaders—ask questions, demand answers, insist on action.

5 **Network and Build Coalitions** Bring together women and feminist activists in your region. Seek support from individuals and groups.
Resources

**Millennium Development Goals**
- Millennium Indicators Database. >>millenniumindicators.un.org/unsd/mi/mi_goals.asp.

**Water**
- Public Citizen’s Water For All Campaign. >>www.publiccitizen.org/cmep/Water.
- Public Services International Research Unit. >>www.psiru.org.

**Energy**

**Land**
- Rural Women’s Access to Land and Property in Selected Countries: Based on Reports to CEDAW. >>www.landcoalition.org/pdf/rehartlI.pdf.

**Biodiversity**

**Other**