

Policy brief

Integrating Gender-Responsive Options for Women's Empowerment in Land Restoration Initiatives



Summary:

Recognizing the significant roles played by women and minorities in land restoration and biodiversity conservation, this brief highlights the unfortunate reality that their perspectives and priorities are not always properly considered in restoration projects. This was made evident through research assessing the extent to which 3 case study NGOs integrated gender at various stages from project development to implementation. Results show that while most land restoration initiatives are gender-sensitive, they do little to develop gender-transformative interventions to overcome existing cultural barriers and biases that limit women's access to and decision-making over resources for land restoration. NGOs and other development practitioners should put in place relevant strategies to have well-trained gender experts in their organizations who reason beyond segregating or simply including men and women in their activities.

This policy brief serves as a call to action for development practitioners and decision-makers to integrate gender-responsive activities in land restoration initiatives.

BOX 1: KEY MESSAGES

1. Development projects should go beyond simply reaching out or providing benefits. They should strive to be transformative and design interventions that take into consideration gender differences in accessing resources (land, seeds and other agricultural inputs, information and advice, credit), empower women economically and enhance their ability to participate in decision-making.
2. Women and minority groups are playing crucial roles in addressing the issue of land degradation. It is important to consider their perspectives, priorities and needs to ensure effective and sustainable land management and increase their contribution to land restoration.
3. It is essential to put more emphasis on gender during project design and implementation. Activities that are responsive to gender should be carefully designed and budgeted to ensure equal benefits in land restoration initiatives.
4. Meaningful participation and equal representation of women and minorities in leadership and decision-making at all levels are vital for progress. It is necessary to enhance their involvement and ensure their voices are heard.

Introduction

This policy brief emphasizes the importance of gender considerations in land restoration initiatives and the challenges faced by organizations in integrating gender perspectives into their approaches, strategies, and activities. It draws upon lessons learned from various land restoration initiatives and provides forward-looking recommendations on enhancing gender considerations in land restoration projects.

Land restoration and land degradation reduction are crucial for Cameroon's sustainable development and long-term resilience. Over 70% of the population in Cameroon, whose livelihoods depend on agriculture, are directly impacted by land degradation (World Bank, 2022). Cameroon has pledged to restore 12 million hectares of land and reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 32% by 2030, aligning with the Bonn Challenge and the African Forest Landscape Restoration. Women cannot be left out in the process because of the important role they play in food cropping and in the management of natural resources (Okpara et al. 2019). In fact, women, particularly those living in rural and conflict areas, and indigenous peoples, bear a disproportionate burden, constituting 75% of workers in the informal agricultural sector and being primarily responsible for their households' welfare and food security (World Bank, 2022).

Women often have limited access to natural resources due to gender differences, and economic, social, political, and legal imbalances. As a result, they are more vulnerable to the effects of land degradation (Jerneck 2018). They are therefore mostly seen as “victims” of land degradation rather than “actors of change”, thereby neglecting their leadership role in transforming landscapes. In addition, women and minority groups also face specific constraints that limit their contribution to land restoration, such as limited land rights, inadequate access to financial resources, training, and technology, and restricted involvement in decision-making arenas at all levels. Overcoming these barriers is necessary for women and minorities to fully contribute to addressing land degradation and other environmental challenges (Orr et al., 2017).

Despite general recognition of the importance of gender, there is a paucity of knowledge about how development actors integrate gender into land restoration activities and what challenges they face. This study hypothesized that there is insufficient consideration of the needs and capacities of women and minority groups in land restoration activities and that this often leads to sub-optimal performance, and at times, complete failure of restoration initiatives. Further, we postulate that, to have a better chance to succeed in enhancing the participation of women and minority groups in landscape restoration activities, interventions are needed in each of the 4 action domains illustrated in Figure 1.

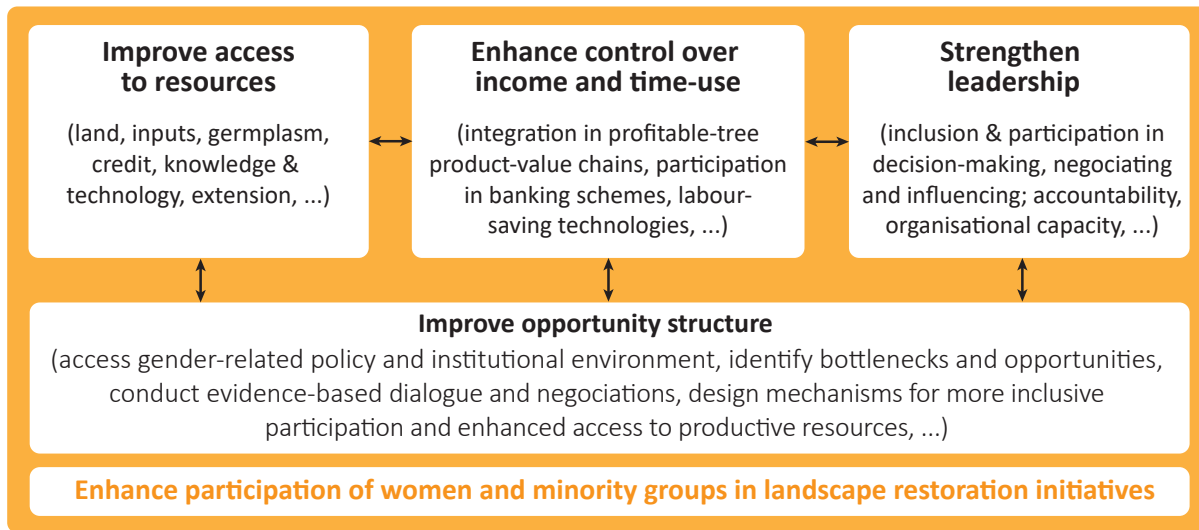


Figure 1: Four action domains to enhance participation of women and minority groups in landscape restoration initiatives

The general objective of the research was to assess if and how ongoing restoration projects consider gender specificities during project identification, planning and implementation in order to identify best practices and formulate recommendations for improvement.

Methodology

We adopted an exploratory research design aimed at identifying gender gaps in past and ongoing restoration initiatives carried out by three case study NGOs involved in restoration activities in Cameroon. We assessed the extent to which gender was integrated in different phases of the projects from design to implementation. In the analyses we adapted the Gender Assessment Tool (GAT)¹ to gather information from project staff, beneficiary community members where the projects were implemented and other key informants. For the community members, mixed and separate men and women's group discussions were organized. The GAT gives an assessment of whether an initiative is gender-blind, sensitive, or transformative (box 2).

BOX 2: DEFINITIONS

Gender: The roles, responsibilities, behaviors, activities, attributes, and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for girls and boys, and women and men. Gender is not ascribed at birth; it can be learned and changes over time and is context specific.

Gender Equality: A state where everyone enjoys equal economic, social, and legal rights and opportunities, with recognition and celebration of all people in all their diversity, regardless of gender identity.

Gender Blind: Ignores gender power dynamics, economics, social and legal rights, and differences in roles and expectations associated with gender which can reinforce gender inequalities and discrimination of women, men, boys, and girls, and therefore by default tends towards harming women and girls.

1 GAT = Gender Assessment Tool. World Health Organization (2011). Gender mainstreaming for health managers: a practical approach, Geneva, Switzerland.

Gender Aware: Examines and addresses the set of economic, social, and political roles, responsibilities, rights, entitlements, obligations, and power relations associated with one's gender, and the dynamic between and among men and women, boys, and girls.

Gender Specific: Designed for a particular sex that target either men, women, boys, or girls only, or a group of people.

Gender Sensitive: Aware of gender norms and inequalities, acknowledges gender power dynamics, different needs, constraints and opportunities of women, men, boys, and girls but does not necessarily address these other than to try and integrate an understanding of these dynamics within program design.

Gender Responsive: Recognizes gender norms and inequalities and creates specific actions, policies, and initiatives to address, reduce and overcome gender inequalities within communities.

Gender Transformative: Examines and seeks to change power structures and root causes of gender inequalities, aiming to redefine systems in which inequalities are created and maintained within society.

Source: Candida et al, 2005

Key results

Restoration activities promoted by the case study NGOs

Interventions to promote access to and control over income and time use for women and minority Bedzang groups in the Ngambe-Tikar

Restoration activities carried out in Ngambe-Tikar focused on sustainable forest management, access to and control over income from forest resources and other nature-based enterprises. Using performance-based financing, the project contributed to empower and directly engage community members, targeting women, youth and minority Bedzang groups in the Ngambe-Tikar subdivision. The project ensured women played a leadership role in the enterprise management and gained positive economic, social and environmental impacts. In total 7 nature-based enterprises were created with 4 enterprises dealing in maize and njansang². The njansang enterprise was responsible for buying uncracked kernels which reduced women's workload and serve as a source of employment and income generation for elderly women in the community. The revenue generated was also used in paying staff to take care of young kids in a kindergarten, thereby giving young mothers enough time to work on their farms.

Interventions to promote leadership and decision-making on land related issues for women and Mbororo in the Western Highlands of Cameroon:

The project facilitated the creation of 5 Landscape Management Committees (CGP) in the West region and enhanced the capacities of women and Mbororo³ to play an active role in those committees. The NGO also facilitated the creation of 20 community businesses with at least 60% for women. Awareness was raised on the concept of sustainable landscape management and on the importance of involving women in decision-making about land. About 1,000 people were sensitized, 56% of whom are women. The project also contributed to reducing pressure on trees for firewood by distributing improved cooking stoves. Other activities to restore land included training women on manufacturing and use of biopesticides and compost, thereby reducing the use of chemical fertilizers.

² Njansang (*Ricinodendron heudelotti*) is a non-timber forest product common in the humid forests of the Congo Basin. The kernels, extracted from the fruits, are ground into powder that is added as spice to many traditional dishes.

³ Mbororo means 'cattle herder' in the Fulani language. They are semi-nomadic, some take the herds to find pasture, while the rest stay home. Their population in Cameroon is estimated at above 1 million

Interventions promoting reforestation and agroforestry to restore degraded lands in the North of Cameroon

The land restoration initiative in the North of Cameroon that was assessed in our study consisted of rehabilitating degraded land through reforestation and agroforestry. Specific support included the distribution of improved seeds of food (maize, peanuts, beans, ground peas) and fodder crops (brachiaria, crotalaria, mucuna, stylosanthes), planting of cashew trees (*Anacardium occidentale*) in degraded landscapes in the Benoue watershed, assistance to farmer organizations in the production of fruit and forest plants, creation of agroforestry plots, and involving women in the processing of neem oil and Shea butter for sales.



From the list of interventions carried out in the three study sites, we noticed that many interventions fall within the action domain of “improving access to resources”, some under “enhance control over income and time”, but much less activities to “strengthen leadership” or “improve opportunity structure”. This can be explained by the fact that projects, being time-bound, are more focused on short-term results to satisfy donor requirements, but also to meet beneficiaries’ expectations of immediate benefits. However, for sustainable impacts to happen, more efforts are needed in the domain of leadership and decision-making, and creation of an enabling environment.

To what extent do land restoration initiatives integrate gender in their approaches?

Table 1 suggests that none of the projects promoted gender inequality, as they did not reinforce unbalanced norms, roles, and relations. Nevertheless, one of the initiatives was found to ignore women’s preferences in the selection of tree species for restoration. In its design, the project focused on a single tree species, i.e. cashew, which may not have been among women’s preference. The project also failed to include women in the choice of land that was to be restored, with as result that priority was given to sites where women used to do most of their food cropping.

In one of the studied initiatives, gender was not a core variable of analysis at the inception phase, but efforts were made during project implementation to enhance women’s participation in the restoration activities. This confirms that most projects are gender-sensitive but often lack methods or tools to actively involve women in all phases of project development. Two of the projects can be classified as “partially gender-sensitive” because they tried to address gender norms through the participation of women and minority groups in restoration activities, but did not address the inequality of decision-making power, nor did they tackle the cultural norms limiting access to land or denial of equal opportunities and rights to certain categories of people, especially women and minority groups.

Finally, only one project made attempts to implement gender-transformative activities by including women in land management boards in a bid to influence gender norms, roles and relations between women and men. This was a real revolution, especially in an area with strong male-dominated cultural norms towards land. Women’s participation in the land management boards will ensure that their voices are heard henceforth, and decisions are made taking into account the needs and aspirations of all.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings presented in this brief suggest that land restoration initiatives in Cameroon make substantial efforts to include gender in their activities, but also face challenges to implement genuine gender-sensitive approaches and struggle even more to set gender-transformative objectives. Therefore, to enhance participation of women and minority groups in land restoration initiatives, without which sustainable impacts both on land and on economic empowerment are not achievable, we propose the following actions.

1. Have well trained gender staff with relevant experience and expertise on gender approaches on board.

Two projects had social scientists with gender background in their teams, but this was not sufficient to develop gender-sensitive/transformational approaches, as women **“representation”** was privileged over **“active participation”** and the need to address biases and barriers was not considered. Having well qualified and experienced gender experts will ensure that the projects understand local realities, be able to develop strategies to overcome existing norms and barriers and be aware of the specific needs and priorities of women and minorities.

2. Ensure gender-responsive consultation processes

Consultation processes, from conception to implementation and monitoring of projects, should recognize and address gender-specific needs, perspectives, and rights. This means that women, minorities, and other stakeholders should be actively involved in decision-making at all levels, by ensuring their perspectives, needs, and priorities are captured through participatory approaches.

3. Empower women through skills development and leadership

Land restoration initiatives should focus on improving women's skills through training programs to enhance their capacity to contribute effectively to land restoration activities, e.g. training on tree growing, soil and water conservation techniques, composting, etc. However, we learnt that enhancing women’s participation in land restoration does not only require technical skill development, but also the promotion of leadership opportunities and decision-making roles for women and increased access to resources, especially land, credit and other agricultural inputs. It is only through combined action in the 4 domains described in Figure 1 that sustainable impacts on women empowerment can be achieved.

4. Address gender discrimination in access to resources

Land restoration initiatives must put in place strategies to tackle gender discrimination within communities, particularly with access to resources such as land, finance, knowledge and extension services. Ensuring that women have equal opportunities to access and control these resources will increase their chances to participate and benefit from land restoration activities. However, this may need innovative approaches, such as promoting collective land tenure for women, community-based extension services, and savings-and-loans schemes which are more flexible for women, etc.

Table 1: Extent to which land restoration projects integrate gender aspects

Degree of gender integration	Gender Aspects	Humid Forest Zone				Soudano-Sahel Zone				Western Highlands			
		Pid	Pim	DM	C/B	Pid	Pim	DM	C/B	Pid	Pim	DM	C/B
1. Gender-unequal	Perpetuates gender inequality by reinforcing unbalanced norms, roles, and relations	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
	Privileges men over women (or vice versa)	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
	Often leads to one sex enjoying more rights or opportunities than the other	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
2. Gender-blind	Ignores gender norms, roles, and relations	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
	Very often reinforces gender-based discrimination	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No

4 Representation here refers to the fact that women and minority groups attend events or gatherings, they are present but do not necessarily take an active role. Participation, on the other hand, implies active involvement and engagement with the purpose of contributing to the outcome or success.

Degree of gender integration	Gender Aspects	Humid Forest Zone				Soudano-Sahel Zone				Western Highlands			
		Pid	Pim	DM	C/B	Pid	Pim	DM	C/B	Pid	Pim	DM	C/B
	Ignores differences in opportunities and resource allocation for women and men	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
	Often constructed based on the principle of being "fair" by treating everyone the same	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
3. Gender-sensitive	Considers gender norms, roles, and relations	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Does not address inequality generated by unequal norms, roles, or relations	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Indicates gender awareness, although often no remedial action is developed	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Increase women and men empowerment	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4. Gender-specific	Considers gender norms, roles and relations for women and men and how they affect access to and control over resources	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Considers women's and men's specific needs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Intentionally targets and benefits a specific group of women or men to achieve certain policy or programme goals or meet certain needs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
	Makes it easier for women and men to fulfil duties that are ascribed to them based on their gender roles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Increase women and men empowerment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5. Gender-transformative	Considers gender norms, roles and relations for women and men and that these affect access to and control over resources	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Considers women's and men's specific needs	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
	Includes ways to transform harmful gender norms, roles, and relations	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
	The objective is often to promote gender equality	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
	Includes strategies to foster progressive changes in power relationships between women and men	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
	Increase women and men empowerment	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes

Pid: Project identification, **Pim:** Project implementation, **DM:** Decision making and **C/B:** Cost and benefit.

5. Collect disaggregated gender data

One of the most effective activities in a project that helps to identify gaps and monitor progress in promoting gender equality, is the generation of disaggregated data by sex to track the involvement and participation of women and minorities in land restoration activities.

6. Implement positive affirmative action and quota systems

Use positive affirmative action and quota systems to enhance women's participation and ensure their substantial representation in land restoration activities. This will help overcome existing barriers and create a more inclusive environment.

By prioritizing these actions, we can make significant progress towards increasing women and minorities' participation in land restoration initiatives and addressing gender discrimination in land management for more sustainable land restoration and economic empowerment. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the successful implementation of these recommendations requires strong buy-in and commitment from decision-makers (policy makers, donors, project managers, community leaders, ...) to make a mind shift towards inclusive development.

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Correct citation: Eponle S, Degrande A, Foundjem-Tita D, Bessengue J. 2024. Integrating Gender-Responsive Options for Women's Empowerment in Land Restoration Initiatives. LRIWEP Policy Brief 1. CIFOR-ICRAF, Yaounde, Cameroon.

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