



INTERREGIONAL: Promotion of the Role of Women in Water and  
Environmental Sanitation Services (PROWESS)

UNDP is working with governments, development agencies and non-governmental organizations to further the involvement of women in water and sanitation activities. Demonstration projects are underway in 13 countries and are planned in seven more.

Background and objectives

Half of the world's people, and three fifths of those in developing countries, do not have easy access to clean drinking water. Even more have no sanitation facilities. Lack of clean water and adequate sanitation are responsible for an estimated 80 per cent of all human illness and disease, as well as incalculable losses in productivity.

This situation has prompted the United Nations General Assembly to launch the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (IDWSSD) (1981-1990). During the Decade, clean water and adequate sanitation are to be provided to as many people as possible.

Decade activities have led to a better understanding of problems and priorities. For example, it has been noted that in many countries, despite major investments, as many as half of new water points and sanitary installations fall into disrepair and are not utilized by their intended beneficiaries, even a short while after installation. Also, it has been found difficult to demonstrate the health benefits of these facilities, since many other factors influence community health, and because villagers do not know or cannot apply the principles of hygiene. Finally, despite major advances in developing inexpensive and easy-to-maintain water supply and sanitation hardware, such as handpumps, financing from governments and external donors does not meet needs.

During the Decade, methodologies and institutional capacities have been developed to meet these challenges. One common approach is to increase community involvement, particularly the participation of women. Women usually have major responsibility for drawing, transporting, storing and using household water and are the main guardians of household hygiene and health. They are also the major beneficiaries of water/sanitation projects since provision of a water point may reduce time spent in collecting water. In some areas this may be as much as six hours per day.

Nevertheless, the need to encourage women's involvement is sometimes overlooked. More often, increasing women's participation is found too difficult, since techniques used have not meshed with traditional patterns of technical co-operation. "We tried to involve women, but they would not come to our meetings," is the frequent cry of project personnel. Health education takes the form of didactic instruction, which has little effect, rather than discussion which allows women to express their views and constraints. Field studies, undertaken by direct questioning, yield information with little relation to reality, hampering sound project planning and evaluation.



PROWESS/UNDP (Promotion of the Role of Women in Water and Environmental Sanitation Services) has worked to meet these challenges since 1983. It is funded by the Governments of Canada, Finland, Norway and the United States as well as by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Working with governments, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and bilateral and multilateral donors, the programme aims to assist countries in:

- project design and execution involving women in the community, including their participation in analyzing situations and collecting data;
- training trainers to give community-level workers techniques to enhance women's participation;
- information and communication programmes which share knowledge about, and encourage further development of, women's proven potential in water/sanitation programmes.

The mainstay of the programme is training in participatory techniques - methodologies which extension workers can use in villages to enable and encourage the involvement of community members. Such techniques are used by many organizations and a major goal of PROWESS/UNDP is to identify local institutions, learn from the techniques they employ, strengthen them by providing additional methodologies, and test and document results.

#### Results to date

PROWESS/UNDP has focussed mainly on field projects. For example:

#### Asia

- Bangladesh: Support is given for the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research in Bangladesh's work in urban slum areas, where it is training women volunteers in health education, intervention and monitoring;
- India: PROWESS/UNDP has contracted local NGO research organizations in four different regions to carry out feasibility studies for women's participation in the national Rural Sanitation Programme in 13 states;
- Indonesia: Support has been given to a national NGO to undertake community participation activities and study results, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, WHO and local research institutions;



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- Nepal: Through participatory workshops, training has been provided to help villagers assess their local needs and resources, select priorities and analyze options. The workshops involve trainers, community NGO workers and village volunteers;
- Sri Lanka: Co-operation has taken place with UNICEF and the National Women's Bureau to promote women's involvement in all phases of a water supply and sanitation project in Anuradhapura State;
- Thailand: The Girl Guides Association of Thailand has taken the lead in a water supply community participation project. Technical backstopping covering water, sanitation and hygiene education is provided by the Ministry of Health.

#### Arab States

- Egypt: A team of Egyptian researchers, in collaboration with the Government and the World Health Organization (WHO), has undertaken and tested participatory community health education and action;
- Sudan: Assistance has been given to Save the Children for an integrated rural development project in Kassala Province which emphasizes women's participation. Assistance is given in collaboration with the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

#### Latin America

- Bolivia: In collaboration with several national and international agencies, notably the Social Emergency Fund, and a UNDP/World Bank programme, pilot health education and community participation activities are being developed which will be applied in a large scale programme in 1989;
- Mexico: In collaboration with UNICEF, which is developing a national health education programme based on its new programme of basic messages (which include water/sanitation), PROWESS/UNDP is providing assistance in developing participatory methodology and testing materials.

#### Africa

- Kenya: Together with UNIFEM, PROWESS/UNDP has been helping the Kenya Water for Health Organization (KWAHO) mobilize communities for self-help in the coastal Kwale District, in support of a Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA)/World Bank programme. Collection of water fees, maintenance, and income generation are all included;

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- Lesotho: In support of a Government sanitation programme supported by UNDP and the World Bank, PROWESS/UNDP has provided health education and participatory activities while beneficiaries build and pay for latrines;
- Zimbabwe: In collaboration with Save the Children, assistance has been given to the Ministry of Health for a farm health worker scheme in which volunteers (women health workers) promote health practices in support of ambulatory clinics.

Additional activities have begun in Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tanzania.

Examples of results at the village level include:

- water committees established in all 70 villages of a demonstration area, with women in key positions. They act as treasurers, collecting water fees; maintain facilities (along with men); and are repairing pumps, following training;
- production of health education materials on topics chosen by villagers;
- eight-month project evaluations in which villagers report more people earning income, a better view of women, greater use of water for hygiene, maintenance of water points, and in some cases, villagers doubling the number of water points provided by Ministry budgets with their own funding;
- extensive follow-up funding for a variety of activities by villagers, governments, local UNDP offices and other donors.

Publications to date have included general studies (e.g., a literature review done in collaboration with the International Reference Centre in Holland); guidelines (e.g., for sanitation, with the World Bank, and for general project development, with the Water and Sanitation for Health (WASH) project of the US Agency for International Development (USAID)); country case studies and analyses (e.g., concerning Kenya, Bangladesh, India and Indonesia); analytical tools (e.g., indicators); and evaluation methodologies. Field manuals are under production (e.g., on training, data collection and health education).

#### Financing

1983 - 1988: US\$4,000,000 (from UNDP and the Governments of Canada, Norway and the United States)

1987 - 1990: US\$1,500,000 (from UNDP and the Government of Finland)

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