

# **WATER SHORTAGE IN MOUNTAIN COMMUNITIES: *Involving women in water Management is the Solution. Case study: Bamendakwe***

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## **Introduction**

Water is a very valuable resource to any community and portable drinking is an assert to every people. It is something that most people will take for granted until it is not available or suitable to drink. Most people suffer from ill health because of lack of portable drinking water. From research carried out by The Foundation for Environment and Development, it reveals that Bamendakwe community suffers from serious water crisis which has made the community at risk of most water borne diseases. The Bamendakwe Highland is the main water shed of Mezam Division in the North West Region of Cameroon, but it is paradoxical that this community in itself is suffering from water insecurity/scarcity and the negative impact is increasing as time progresses. It is a rural community with a population of about 18000 inhabitants with a composition of 60% females and 40% males. Most of the women are engaged in farming and small scale businesses and craft work. On the other hand most of the men are civil servants business men or craftsmen. Within this community women and daughters are basically responsible for the collection of water for domestic use. It is rather unfortunate that attempts to provide water to this community do not take into consideration the important role of women in this respect.

## **Water Problems within Bamendakwe Community**

The community of Bamendakwe as a mountain community faces the following difficulties leading to insecurity and shortage in the provision of water:

It is unfortunate that almost all the streams, rivers and spring sources of the highland flow through the valleys that are located far away from habitable regions. Inhabitants especially women and children have to trek for long distances before they can reach spring sources to get water.

There is also spontaneous deforestation around the region, over the years especially on the water catchments causing a drop in water supply especially

during the dry seasons. Water volumes have really reduced while some springs have refused to flow.

Also in 1978 the Government of Cameroon initiated a project to tap water mid way Nkimebang stream in the region to supply the water to Bamenda (the nearest Urban Town) but the plan of the project failed to supply water to the donor community. Out of 9 taps that were constructed by the government for the community, only 5 are currently flowing and the water from these taps is untreated for consumption given that the treatment station for the project is located at the edge of the village (after the taps). The few taps that are currently flowing are not regular. As a back up to the situation, the community has constructed a small water tank at a spring catchments but the size is too small that it can only supply water to some priority areas like the Fon's Palace and the Health Center.

The community is in lack of water and sanitation education as upstream communities do not consider the water needs of downstream users. Up stream wash their cloths directly into the stream, take their cattle directly into the stream to drink water, throw refuse into the streams and even defecate in the streams. This keeps down stream population at risk of water borne diseases as they rely on the water for drinking and cooking.

However several attempts have been made by the community members to provide water to their community. Firstly they have written petition to government, but there have been no response to their petition. Secondly they have, on their own created different water committees in the different quarters which is managing its water problem individually. Also the community has constructed small water catchments to supply water to some priority areas like the Fon's palace and the Health Center.

### **Gender as A missing factor**

Women have a great role to play as far as integrated water resource management is concern. They take care of the availability of sufficient water for all in the household; traditionally they manage domestic water sources and together with daughters fetch water, which is usually very far.

In the case of Bamendakwe, they have to travel on very long distances from the hills to the valleys to collect water. They are also responsible for most of the domestic work which makes them the ones who use more water in and

around the house. However, men, and especially the male leaders, often control the water sources and formulate the major decisions related to location and type of facilities available. It is rather unfortunate that out of the seven water committees that are created in Bamendakwe in an attempt to reduce the shortage and scarcity of water, there is no single woman who is part of the committee. The men are solely the ones who take decisions relating to water management in the region. The differentiated gender relations are often reinforced by official efforts to improve domestic water supply. This is always the case, despite widespread proof that water management function better when both women and men are actively involved in planning, construction, operation and maintenance.

Only when women are directly involved in a meaningful way will solutions be found that are appropriate and sustainable. Involving women's skills and interests in domestic water management also has the potential of addressing gender imbalances in society, leading to more equity. Conventional approaches in the water supply sector are generally not gender-sensitive and have undervalued women's needs and contributions to the sector. Women's knowledge about water sources and the multiple uses of water are not given significant recognition.

When women have access to water, they will have more time for child care and economic activities that will improve their families' quality of life and their own health and wellbeing.

On the other hand, hygiene is important for a sustainable and safe water supply; half of the contamination of water happens after fetching it. Water might be stored in dirty pots or water sources can become polluted, because people are watering livestock from the same source. However, while hygiene promotion and education typically focus on women and girls, this does not reach men who are often the ones to take major decisions in the household. All family members need to be aware of hygiene issues to make it work. As men and boys often serve as role models, they should be involved in hygiene promotion and education programmes. To be more gender sensitive, such programmes need to target men and boys through culturally appropriate channels.

## **FEDEV Role in Mainstreaming Gender in Bamendakwe Water Management Program**

Mainstreaming gender into water management is a very important aspect of Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM). Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) is a systematic process for the sustainable development, allocation, and monitoring of water resources. It is an approach that aims to ensure the coordinated development of water, land and related resources to optimise economic and social welfare without compromising the sustainability of environmental systems (Global Water Partnership, 2000). IWRM offers an opportunity to create a paradigm shift in water resources management. The global environmental crisis, growing poverty in urban and rural areas, and continued gender inequalities all point to the need for a different governance approach to water use and management, (Thomas et al, 1997)

In mainstreaming Gender into Water resource management within the Bamendakwe, FEDEV, a Non Governmental Organisation based in Bamenda, Cameroon in collaboration with Global Water Partnership, IDLO and other stakeholders have organized training and sensitization seminar within Bamendakwe focusing on the importance of involving everybody including women, men, boys and girls in water management. In solving the problem of water shortage and ensuring that there is the effective mainstreaming of Gender in its management FEDEV have worked to create a single water committee with both men and women at the decision making level. In sensitizing both local communities and government, emphasis on the fact that participation of all stakeholders leads to better water management. Because of women's traditional roles in water resources management, they have knowledge which should be included in planning and practice.

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### **Conclusion**

In eradicating or reducing the problem of water shortage within the Bamendakwe community the government and private institutions need to recognize that involving both women and men in integrated water resources initiatives can increase project effectiveness and efficiency. Participation by

both women and men improves project performance and improves the likelihood of sustainability. In other words, a project is more likely to achieve what planners hope it will achieve if women and men (both rich and poor) are active participants and decision makers. In addition to a vast body of anecdotal evidence, three specific studies have looked at this issue:

*Voice and Choice for Women - Linkages on Demand, Gender and Poverty from 44 Water Schemes in Asia and Africa. A research project of the UNDP/World Bank Water and Sanitation Programme. 2001.*

Preliminary findings appear to validate the hypothesis that water services will be better sustained and used by the communities if institutions and policies enable the communities (men and women, rich and poor) to initiate the service, take informed decisions about the type of service management and financing systems and build capacities to maintain and manage the services so that burdens and benefits are equitably shared.

*(A World Bank review of 121 rural water supply projects)*