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TECHNICAL BRIEF
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GENDER AND DROUGHT

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KEY MESSAGES

- **Drought is a growing global crisis with far reaching impacts.** Climate change and unsustainable land use are increasing the frequency and severity of droughts, affecting landscapes, biodiversity, economic sectors including agriculture, and human wellbeing, ultimately worsening poverty, food insecurity, conflict, displacement, and gender inequality.
- **Women and girls are disproportionately affected by drought.** Existing gender inequalities mean women often face greater burdens during drought, including increased responsibility for water collection, reduced livelihood opportunities, higher exposure to Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and amplification of other existing inequalities, which in turn reinforce the impacts of drought over time.
- **Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are an effective but underutilised response to drought.** NbS, such as ecosystem restoration, can strengthen drought resilience while supporting biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods. However, limited understanding, funding, and institutional or community capacity can hinder implementation.
- **Women's meaningful participation is essential for successful drought management and NbS implementation.** Women should be actively involved in planning, decision-making, implementation, and benefits sharing of drought response, including NbS. This can improve the effectiveness, equity, and long-term sustainability of interventions while helping to reduce existing social and economic inequalities.
- **Gender-responsive policies and investments are critical for resilience.** Governments and organisations can empower women through education, access to resources, sustainable livelihood opportunities, leadership roles, and gender-sensitive training. Supportive policies may address GBV or land tenure discrimination, strengthen local participation, or integrate gender considerations into drought management strategies and action plans.

What is the issue?

Drought is an increasingly impactful threat to human wellbeing. Droughts are exacerbated by climate change and unsustainable land use practices, and they are occurring more frequently and with greater severity. Drought can have devastating impacts on people and communities, contributing to conflict over resources, civil unrest and instability, heightened repression of women and marginalised groups, and increased rates of Gender-Based Violence. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to harmful knock-on effects caused by drought due to existing inequalities and stigmas, which is turn may hamper efforts to address and prevent the worsening of drought.

Nature-based Solutions can be employed to combat drought and its negative effects on people and nature. However, barriers to NbS may hamper or preclude its adoption by stakeholders and governing bodies. These barriers may include lack of understanding of NbS or lack of institutional capacity or funding. Where NbS is adopted, it may fail to be optimally implemented due to siloing of environmental agencies and their actors, failure to include diverse stakeholders including women, or limited resource allocation. Participatory stakeholder engagement and community buy-in are especially important for the effective implementation of NbS. Drought adaptation, mitigation, and prevention programs must account for these barriers from their inception and develop strategic mechanisms for overcoming them. Moreover, men and women alike must

be included and actively engaged in drought programs if these initiatives are to succeed, both in terms of addressing drought and preventing the negative ripple effects which most heavily burden women, girls, and marginalised groups.

Why is this important?

Drought as an urgent environmental and socioeconomic challenge

Historically, droughts have caused extensive damage, with over 620,000 events recorded between 1900 and 2013, resulting in economic losses totalling US$ 262 billion. Between 2000 and 2019, climate-related events, including drought, caused 995,330 deaths worldwide. Despite these impacts, effective responses to drought remain a challenge, with reactive and crisis-oriented approaches dominating many interventions.

The consequences of drought extend beyond households and rural livelihoods, impacting industrial operations and sectors such as energy, agriculture and water supply.

Africa bears the brunt of drought, experiencing 40% of global events, resulting in substantial socio-economic losses and environmental degradation. The European Union, the United Kingdom of Great Britain, and Northern Ireland are facing escalating annual losses due to drought, expected to reach over €65 billion by 2100, emphasising the urgent need for climate action and adaptation measures.

The typology of drought includes meteorological, agricultural, ecological, hydrological, and socio-economic drought, each with distinct characteristics. However, the perception of drought is complex, operating on different temporal scales and manifesting itself as water shortages affecting stream flows, reservoirs, groundwater levels and long-term environmental processes with socio-economic consequences. The multifaceted nature of drought and its varied definitions pose challenges in analysing, assessing, monitoring, and addressing drought, hindering the development of reliable early warning systems and coherent policies.

Water deficit, a concern in drylands, is exacerbated by climate change, leading to more frequent and severe droughts. Dryland biodiversity exhibits resilience to water stress thanks to various adaptations. The degradation of the environment and the scarcity of natural resources pose significant threats to ecosystems and livelihoods, leading to or worsening biodiversity loss, food insecurity, poverty, displacement, violence, and the loss of traditional and cultural knowledge. The resulting tensions and competition for limited resources within and between communities, households, and industries exacerbate existing inequalities, discrimination, and exploitation between men and women, including increasing the risk of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) as a means to control and reinforce power imbalances.

The gendered dimensions of drought

Women constitute the majority of the world's population below the poverty line, are more dependent on natural resources and are more vulnerable to natural disasters. Drought therefore results in differential impacts between the sexes. Due to their unique social and economic vulnerabilities, women and girls are disproportionately harmed by drought, both directly—for example, by requiring women to travel further and devote more time to water collection—and indirectly—such as increasing the rigidity of existing gender norms and contributing to increased rates of GBV. Gender inequality and drought often feed into one another through a positive feedback cycle, where inequality between the sexes contributes to increased frequency and severity of drought, which in turn further solidifies inequality and increases the vulnerability of women and girls to environmental stressors, GBV, and social exclusion. Thus, solutions aimed at mitigating and adapting to drought and its effects ought to incorporate gender considerations in order to reduce disproportionate impacts and increase the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of interventions.

Women may also contribute to drought in unique ways, generally due to prescribed gender norms which dictate labour division and subsequently the household and livelihood activities they engage in. Within contexts where drought occurs,

Although the details of experiences of women in drought contexts may differ between regions and cultures, common experiences and trends exist, reinforcing the need to emphasise gender-responsive approaches to drought across contexts. With that said, strategies for addressing gender inequality should be adaptive to the local community's context to maximise effectiveness. Additionally, women may possess other marginalised identities (e.g. they may live in poverty or be part of a persecuted religious or ethnic minority) that worsen their experiences during drought. These nuances must be recognised in mitigation strategies.

What can be done?

Addressing drought through inclusive Nature-based Solutions

A Nature-based Solution (NbS) is an action that incorporates natural features and processes to protect, conserve, restore, sustainably use, and manage natural or modified ecosystems to address socio-environmental challenges while providing measurable co-benefits to and benefit both people and nature. Nature-based Solutions provide opportunities to effectively combat drought while providing sustainable livelihood opportunities that contribute to the economic security of communities. However, NbS remains an underutilised and sometimes poorly understood mechanism for addressing environmental challenges among stakeholders. This can lead to barriers for implementation of NbS and risk if stakeholders are unwilling to consider or fully adopt NbS.

Sustainable Land Management, defined as the use of land resources to meet human needs while ensuring long-term environmental functions, is integral to NbS. The IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions, launched in 2019, provides a framework for designing, analysing and verifying NbS, considering criteria such as scoping global challenges, designing interventions at scale, as well as considering environmental sustainability, social equity and economic viability. Challenges in implementing NbS for drought planning include the need to prioritise societal challenges, understand human well-being outcomes and strategically address root causes. Drought resilience involves complex interactions between environmental, human, social and economic factors, requiring comprehensive planning.

For NbS to be efficacious, women must be fully included and involved in planning, decision-making, and implementation. Some NbS interventions should target women specifically, such as sustainable agriculture models which can replace unsustainable farming practices carried out by women. Women should also be involved in decision-making and policymaking processes so that their interests are incorporated into action plans and laws. In contexts where women are excluded from these processes, NbS is liable to be less effective and less widely adopted. Moreover, women's exclusion from NbS adoption for drought can worsen existing inequalities, such as income disparities and land access restrictions. Women's exclusion may also allow unsustainable practices which contribute to drought to continue, as women will lack the education and trainings needed to transition away from unsustainable land management practices towards NbS.

Recommendations for gender-responsive drought management

Women are currently not sufficiently involved in sustainable land management or drought responses, despite expressing interest in gaining the requisite skills and knowledge and being involved in decision-making processes. This absence is particularly felt in the regions where drought is most intense and gender norms are most restrictive. Women must therefore be better involved in all stages of drought prevention and response, from on-the-ground mitigation activities, to adaptive land management and sustainable livelihood adoption, to governance and decision-making across scales.

1. Empower women and girls through access to resources, education, information, and decision-making platforms.
2. Strengthen women's economic resilience through livelihood diversification and income-generating activities. Promote sustainable livelihood development for men and women alike.
3. Provide gender-sensitive training and capacity building on drought preparedness and response, with an emphasis on conducting programs for women, including trainings on climate change and drought awareness, small grant programs, and other salient topics.

4. Address GBV through prevention programs, safe spaces, and support services. Provide platforms where women and girls feel safe and empowered to discuss GBV in the context of drought, such as through anonymous surveys and interviews or female-only workshops.
5. Engage men and boys as allies in promoting gender equality and challenging harmful social norms. Provide education to men and boys on the benefits to them and their communities that result from women's inclusion in drought management, mitigation, prevention, and adaption.
6. Ensure successful implementation of regional, national, and local drought strategies through provisioning of adequate resources, targeted capacity building, and strengthening of political will. Ensure strategies consider local and regional obstacles to gender equity and parity in drought management programs.
7. Research, recognise, and plan for unintended and disparate gender impacts which may arise from drought interventions, including but not limited to wage disparities or power imbalances which may be exacerbated by drought prevention and adaptation programs that preferentially employ or delegate decision-making to men. Implement adequate risk management and safeguarding protocols to prevent unintended negative impacts.
8. Formally involve women and women's associations in NbS initiatives and the sustainable management of resources such as water and forests. Promote adapted farming systems, the use of water and soil conservation techniques, reforestation and the sustainable management of resources using a gender-responsive human rights-based approach, particularly for women farmers.
9. Government agencies should develop multi-scale Gender Action Plans to supplement their respective drought strategies to ensure gender dimensions are considered and women are included in the drought management and prevention process. When developing these plans, stakeholders should be consulted, especially community members such as women who are most severely affected by drought.
10. Broadly, states should review, amend or repeal laws, policies and practices that create or perpetuate GBV and gender-differentiated environmental impacts. They should reduce inequalities linked to land ownership, land occupation and access to resources, and strengthen the role of women in the conservation and management of resources through policymaking.

UNCCD COP17 as an opportunity for action

The 17th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP17) to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) presents a prime opportunity to not only recognise the interconnection between gender and drought, but to take concrete action towards implementing gender-responsive drought management strategies, responses, and finance mechanisms. Per the IUCN Position Paper for UNCCD COP17, Parties can strengthen the structural participation of women across UNCCD processes and LDN implementation, particularly through adoption of gender-responsive approaches to Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN), drought resilience, and land management. This will ensure effective participation of key stakeholders and, ultimately, better outcomes for drought-affected ecosystems and communities.

IUCN's role in advancing solutions

With financial support from the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) and International Partnerships Austria, IUCN is advancing effective gender-responsive drought management alongside government and civil society partners, including in Burkina Faso, Georgia, and Kenya through the project **Accelerating Action for Resilience and Innovation in Drought Risk Management (ARID)**. More broadly, IUCN is pioneering adaptive drought solutions in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, supporting local communities, biodiversity, and climate resilience in the process.

Where can I get more information?

Access the official IUCN Position Paper for UNCCD COP17 | https://iucn.org/resources/position-paper/iucn-position-paper-unccd-cop17

Explore IUCN's work on drylands, grasslands, and rangelands | iucn.org/our-work/topic/drylands-grasslands-and-rangelands

Explore IUCN's work on ecosystem restoration and land degradation | iucn.org/our-work/topic/ecosystem-restoration-and-land-degradation

Learn about IUCN's work on drought, funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) |

iucn.org/our-work/topic/drylands-and-land-degradation/restoring-ecosystems-reduce-drought-risk-and-increase

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