



## Case Study on

# CEDAW Role in Restoring Azraq Oasis

## INTRODUCTION

In Jordan, women's rights are enshrined in law by ratifying the conventions which provide the legal framework for women to claim their rights (CEDAW, UNCoRC), but frequently ignored in practice. Increasingly, women are aware of this inequity, and began to speak out about it. But they lack effective mechanisms to pursue their rights and entitlements effectively.

Advocacy programs have typically focused on the basic rights of women, namely those revolving around women personal status and safety such as the right to be protected from domestic abuses, equitable right to employment, freedom of movement, right to inheritance, etc. However, women deem other rights as more prior including right to healthcare, to education and to water use and management. Such priority stems from their being a fundamental pillar in the lives and livelihoods of the poor, women in particular.

NGOs were more inclined to launch small projects and service delivery activities, downplaying women potentials for providing insightful advices and the importance of mobilizing their private-sector partners to serve the welfare of the poor.

Against such background the Arab Women Organization started to push forward advocacy efforts for the benefit of all local-level women in order to develop a viable model that is susceptible to consultancy systems by which women are actively involved in decision making processes along with decision makers and service providers. This model will place women in position to claim their rights and needs either on the local level or the governorate level. Optimal investment of this position requires building the capacities of women in rural communities and facilitating dialogue between women and other stakeholders which qualifies the existing networks to become embedded in the local level and governorate level governance structures. It also requires developing a coordination and communication mechanisms through which information is exchanged vertically and horizontally among multilevel stakeholders and women rights pursued.

## THE SITUATION IN AZRAQ



Photo 1: The situation in Azraq a few years ago

Spreading over 3500 km<sup>2</sup> and inhabited by 12,500 people, the Azraq district is located in the northern Badia (desert) of Jordan. Administratively, it is part of Zarqa Governorate and is 100 km to the northeast of Amman city. Azraq is on the RAMSAR List of Wetlands of International Importance due to its unique biodiversity.

In the heart of Azraq district there is the Azraq Basin that is considered the most significant basin in Jordan. Located in northeastern part of the country, bordering Syria in the north and Saudi Arabia in the east, the Basin extends over an area of 710,12 km<sup>2</sup>, 94% of which is located in Jordan and the rest

in Syria. The Azraq Basin is a main source of high quality surface and ground water. Most recent studies suggest that the Basin's groundwater is 4,000 to 20,000 years old.

The Azraq Oasis used to be a destination for more than a million migratory birds in spring. However, resources and biodiversity have been challenged in the past few decades by practices detrimental to the environment and population alike. But the hope to restore -to some extent- those healthy conditions in the Basin and Oasis was rekindled when new participatory-based projects were introduced to the district.

Deterioration in the Azraq Oasis was considerable as water resources were over extracted through illegal wells and increasing demand by Amman City for drinking purposes, eventually leading to desertification and excess in levels of soil salinity. All were affected in the area, the environment and the population, especially farmers and livestock owners. Women were also affected not only in their household needs but also in those water-reliant simple projects through which they were generating a much-needed additional income such as small home gardens with yields sold in the neighborhood. In addition, as municipality water is supplied to the houses only three days a week working housewives also suffer for not being able to benefit from the limited pumping durations while being at work.

The water problem in Azraq is of a governance origin and the community there is encountered with several economic, social and political conditions challenging the adoption of more effective water governance approaches. The manner in which a certain society regulates its water resources is extremely significant for enhancing sustainable development and an integral element in poverty mitigation strategies. Sustainable development is about the community's ability to establish the essential balance between economic and social development and integrity of the ecosystem.



**Photo 2: The current situation in Azraq**

Against this background and funded by the EU, the Arab Women Organization launched the "Monitoring CEDAW Implementation" Project for restoring the Azraq Oasis and checking desertification in partnership with the IUCN/ROWA<sup>1</sup> and with involvement from the local community in order to enhance water governance and improve women participation in water resources management. To ensure active participation of the local community, collecting and analyzing information was entirely carried out by the community.

The partnership between the Arab Women Organization and IUCN/ROWA was made in the context of REWARD program that aims at influencing decision makers in order to adopt an integrated approach to water resources management on the basis on Article 14 of CEDAW. This article addresses discrimination against rural women, being with specific problems that need great attention from signatory countries that should pledge eliminating any discrimination against them as to become able to be involved in rural development and planning and have access to healthcare services, social security, training and education and agriculture loans as well as enjoy good living standards and participate in societal activities.

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<sup>1</sup>The IUCN is the world's oldest and largest global environmental network - a democratic membership union with more than 1,000 government and NGO member organizations, seeking to help the world find pragmatic solutions to our most pressing environment and development challenges. It supports scientific research, manages field projects all over the world and brings governments, non-government organizations, United Nations agencies, companies and local communities together to develop and implement policy, laws and best practice. IUCN has offices in more than 45 countries and runs hundreds of projects around the world. One of these offices is the Regional Office for West Asia (ROWA) that was established in October 2004 covering the region of West Asia, Central Asia and North Africa (WESCAN). ROWA is based in Amman, Jordan.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The project tested practical approaches and mechanisms to ensure that all stakeholders including women will be involved on the local level water related decision making process. A major assumption of the project is that such involvement –especially on the local and intermediate levels- will improve water resources management which entails a better consideration of the water users' needs and establishes consolidated responsibilities that are a major requirement of participation in the water sector.

The local community worked with the other stakeholders through committees and local councils that are comprised of government agencies, private sector water providers and CBOs. One of the effective analysis tools that were also used by the different stakeholders was Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems (RAAKS)<sup>2</sup>. Following the analysis earlier planning was put to implementation through identifying opportunities for enhancing information availability and exchange and decision making among the stakeholders. After that, representatives of the stakeholders were elected as to work concertedly in projects in which all limitations would be removed and opportunities invested for working together in integrated water resources management.

One of the goals of the projects was designing an efficient framework and build capacities on different levels for the purpose of improving integrated water resources management based on real cooperation among all stakeholders. Upon that, women involvement in planning and decision making processes became acknowledged as an effective factor in integrative decisions that was absent when women's involvement was not considered an important issue which negatively affected previous projects. This emerging involvement is now playing a vital role in ensuring sustainability through an in-depth appreciation of the role of capacity building in decision making related to livelihood standards on the long range. Capacity building would enhance interaction between all levels (from national to local) and create a more accurate designation of roles and responsibilities in decision making process.



**Photo 3: Women side by side with men in all project's processes**

The participatory water resources planning and management process was based on identification of water related problems and long-term developmental vision and scenario building. These will help the stakeholders make technical and political decisions on an improved management of water resources on the one hand and sustainability on the other.

### THE PROJECT FROM A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Samia is an active member in Azraq local community whose efforts, vitality and dedication would not go unnoticed. She worked in the Azraq Women Society that was established by efforts of the district women who were not content with their

typical roles of domestic chores and looking after their children but opted to contribute to their community through membership in municipal councils and enrollment in any arena for developmental and voluntary activities.

Recollecting how change took place, Samia goes back to 2006 when people in her community started observing projects in the area that sought to restore the Azraq Oasis. While implementing these projects, several meetings were held to discuss cost effective ecological restoration of the Oasis. At that time, the citizens were wondering whether the apparent soil salinity was due to rain scarcity, stakeholders were not

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<sup>2</sup> Participatory tools were identified enabling all stakeholders to recognize their rights and responsibilities when these tools helped identifying opportunities for information improvement and exchange and decision-making based on awareness of rights and responsibilities.

concerned about reasons of that salinity or its implications. Samia saw the problem from a different corner. Despite the multiple opportunities in which the stakeholders and the community discussed local problems, no solutions were reached and none of the local community groups -especially women- were taken seriously by the stakeholders.

On the hand, several CBOs sought to rectify the situation in Azraq through projects like greywater treatment projects, establishing treatment plants and renovating water networks. Not only those projects failed but some stopped during implementation. Among the projects there were two on water demand and use management (drip irrigation). However, lack of follow up from donors and absence of a holistic vision for project management undermined the results.

Describing the pilot project implemented by the Arab Women Organization in partnership with IUCN/ROWA, Samia emphasized the drastic change in the local community introduced by the project. It has minimized deeply-rooted enmities in the Azraq community. The project workshops and meetings assumed a practical application of participatory concepts and learning whose effectiveness became evident as the project team was able to convince the locals of the necessity of women involvement in planning and decision making processes of societal development as early as the beginning of the project and side by side with men. Hence, women were represented in the local committee. Women presence made them aware of the situation in Azraq and consequently enabled them to participate in information collecting and analysis through which they succeeded in highlighting the importance of women's important role in the community.



Photo 4: During the work-group meetings

Samia enthusiastically attended discussions and meetings and joined a work group in collecting and analyzing information and conducting surveys and need assessments despite the initial rejection she was faced from the groups and citizens. She was able with the support of her colleagues to go beyond the social hurdles hindering information collection and win the trust and advocacy of the local community.

## **CHANGE OCCURRENCE**

Shortly after starting to implement "Monitoring CEDAW Implementation Project" in Azraq district a significant change in the behaviors and tendencies of the local community started to emerge. This change was manifested in a novel cooperation, teamwork and voluntary spirit among the different working group members in addition to acceptance and support of women role. Yet the profoundest change was bringing together the Azraq inhabitants from all origins.

Samia is now the head of Working Women Society after being an employee there. She is still playing active role in her community giving a role model of efficient woman capable of leaving an impact. In addition to her multifaceted interest in Azraq community, Samia is also seeking to operate the dairy plant that was established few years ago by the former head of the society but had to stop due to lack of funding.

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