

Agents of Environmental Sustainability: Field Experiences of Ntengwe for Community Development's Self Help Groups Participating in Climate Change Projects

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Abstract

The academic world has been complicit in the historical marginalization of women in environmental management. This is reflected in the majority of studies on the environment which have assumed biological and physical perspectives excluding the social aspects that can reveal the critical roles of women in environmental sustainability. Women have been excluded from key processes to address environmental degradation and the effects of climate change. Given this background, this study assessed the Self Help Group approach used by Ntengwe to examine the roles community groups particularly women are playing in promoting environmental sustainability as a way of building resilience to climate change in Hwange district. This has greater potential to reveal how community grounded structures can become proactive change agents and has relevance to environmental sustainability. This study broadly adopted an empirical approach and used data from the Self Help Group programme being implemented by Ntengwe in Hwange district which was complimented by project data and reports on environmental management and resilience building towards climate change issues. Women have been able to initiate individual income businesses and use group dynamics to successfully demand climate smart irrigation technologies from civil society. At the project level, women are active plot holders practicing organic farming, coordinating environmental clean-up campaigns and tree planting events activities. The conclusion of this study is that the Self-Help Group approach is helping women in supporting all the three pillars of the economic, social and environmental sustainability. The study recommends promoting bottom up approaches in promoting environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Ntengwe for Community Development, climate change, environmental sustainability, environmental degradation, Self-Help Group, community social capital

1. Introduction

This research is based on the empirical project of Ntengwe for Community Development which has been continuously working with the communities under the study. We are very grateful for this support. The works of SHGs have come to fruition because of the development efforts of Kindernothilfe and Huairou Commission who are funding Ntengwe for Community Development to implement the Self Help Group Approach and Resilience building towards Climate change with the Self Help Groups in Hwange district respectively.

According to the Drishti The Vision Foundation (2016), the term 'self-help group' or SHG can be used to describe a wide range of financial and non-financial associations, and in India it has come to refer to a form of Accumulating Saving and Credit Association (ASCA) promoted by government agencies, NGOs or banks. In other words, Self-Help Groups (SHG) are informal associations of people who choose to come together to find ways to improve their living conditions. They help to build Social Capital among the poor, especially women who are registered as the highly vulnerable sectors of every society on a global sphere. SHGs are distinguished according to their origin and sources of funds. Several SHGs have been carved out of larger groups, formed under Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) programmes for more broad-based activities and promoted within the parameters of the bank linkage schemes but as part of integrated development programmes. The SHG program implemented by Ntengwe for Community development uses this SHG approach which is a paradigm into rural communities and relies on women to create the necessary social capital needed to build confidence and capacity of women as proactive change agents of development. The women led SHGs act to address climate change in the communities of Hwange district. With such programs, women have become effective agents of change in supporting both mitigating and adaptation activities against long spells of drought, food shortages and environmental degradation brought by climate change in the local communities of Hwange district. Before the SHG Approach to poverty alleviation was introduced in Hwange district, it was very unusual for women to participate in community development work and hold posts in structures such as local leadership, traditional leadership and School Development Committees (SDC) especially during gatherings and community events. This was as a result of lack of structures that promote women's interactions, more cultural and religious beliefs that hinders women to actively make decisions on their social and economic development. The SHG Approach aimed at creating self-esteem for women so that they can be able to take part in community developmental events.

2. Literature review

Environmental sustainability has been a development issue for a very long time gaining widespread popularity with the World Commission on Environment and Development definition of 1987. The question of environmental sustainability emanates from the concept of the “maintenance of natural capital” which is connected to, both social sustainability and economic sustainability of a community (Morelli, 2011). Due to the depleting globe, humanity is at stake of survival and therefore, a call to take action against malicious human actions on the environment is a universal obligation which involves all communities’ at different levels of governance.

Callicott and Mumford in Morelli (2011) noted that, the meaning of the term “ecological sustainability” connects human needs and ecosystem services which is further translated to meaning; “meeting human needs without compromising the health of ecosystems.” This concept should be a guiding principle for areas where human activities take place so as to ensure a sustainable community which accommodate all without threats and risks of survival.

The linkages between poverty reduction, natural resource management and development, as well as local and global environmental challenges need to be identified in order to address a common agenda to collectively manage shared global environmental risks and to build resilience across all types of countries to contribute to inclusive and sustainable development, taking into account complex issues such as the interactions between food, water and energy security (OECD, 2013). This is the common cause that has influenced the activities of the SHGs in Hwange district as they roll on their activities in a bid to fight poverty persecuting the rural population.

To implement the agenda of sustainable environmental management, a wide range of policies and policy reforms need to be promoted inclusively in order to improve the well-being of all. The SHGs have given room to the most segregated sectors of the societies who are the women to work towards improving environmental management since they are the ones mostly involved in production activities in the rural areas particularly in the agricultural sector. The 2013 OECD Report underwrites that sustainability is a transformative shift required to drive development and with a backup of a range of integrated goals and indicators on governance, at sector level and on cross-cutting themes – that relate to environmental sustainability such as SHGs which magnifies decision making and policy making.

According to Mwangi (2018), the global economy will lose a whopping US\$23 trillion by 2050 through land degradation, whereas the cost of taking immediate action, estimated to be around US\$4.6 trillion, is only a fraction of the predicted losses. Such estimates call for collective actions to mitigate the effects of poor management of the environment which further indulges with the impact associated with climate change as Strutton (2004) said that traditionally when environmental problems arises, environmental managers work out how to reduce the damage or wastage. However, it is not always easy to work out exactly when and where threats will have their effects and often the impacts are hard to reverse. Hence, environmental sustainability issues have informed the activities of the SHGs as there is a high risk of difficult or irreversible loss of the qualities of the environment in the district of Hwange.

2.2 The objectives of SHGs

According to Kindernothilfe [KNH] (2011) the SHG Approach is a rights-based approach which views poverty as the denial of rights and poverty alleviation as a process of reclaiming one’s rights. Das and Bhowal (2013: 142) concur that the SHG is a technique of organizing poor people and the marginalized to come together to solve their individual problems. The Self Help Group (SHG) concept is therefore an instrument used to combat poverty in a sustainable way by socially and economically empowering poor women using locally available resources. The approach of SHG does not give temporary one-off benefits in the form of money or food, but empowers poor women to develop themselves and their households sustainably. Ntengwe has taken advantage of this concept and uses it to increase the knowledge of women in understanding climate change and its impact on their communities in Hwange district, Zimbabwe. In addition to this, the program also aims to strengthen organized rural women to confidentially engage with government policy makers and other non-state actors in coming up with solutions to address the impact of climate change. This is in line with KNH (2011) when noting that given the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, however, the SHG Approach puts equal emphasis on the goals of economic, social and political empowerment. The SHG approach used by Ntengwe addresses both the economic, social and environmental challenges being experienced by women in Hwange district.

3. The SHG Strategy to addressing climate change

According to the United Nations Issue Brief of 2014, volunteerism has been a key driver of the global environmental movement, mobilizing communities all over the world to help address environmental problems. The brief goes on to argue that the potential of volunteerism in environmental sustainability has not yet been fully recognized or captured. Ntengwe has adopted the Self Help Groups as voluntary social capital groups that can address environmental challenges affecting their communities. In her study of some of the Self Help Groups

working with Ntengwe in Matetsi ward, Hwange district, Nyathi (2016) captures this when she observes that additionally, some NGOs have taken the opportunity to introduce the Self Help Group (SHG) concept in an effort to empower rural women economically and to build community resilience against threats posed by climate change. Ntengwe has therefore adopted four key strategies for working with women to build mitigation and adaptation strategies to climate change. These strategies include strengthening grassroots women's organizing and leadership, using SHG approach, promoting resilience through locally led initiatives and influencing public policy for development.

3.1 Methodology

This study used primary data from focus group discussions which was complimented by project data and reports on environmental management and resilience building towards climate change issues. Existing literature was also consulted to acknowledge their relevance in this academic study and how they have helped sharpen the understanding of how SHG projects in other parts of the world have improved the lives of women who are the most vulnerable elements of every society whether patriarchal or feminine.

3.2 Sample and target population

Boyd (2018) has described a sample of a study as simply the participants in a study. This research had 72 women from SHGs who participated in the study, key informant interviews with seven Water Management Committee members and 10 committee members of Kuguta Kulima garden were conducted in the district of Hwange. Boyd (ibid) went on to say that a population is the group of people that a researcher want to make assumptions about, hence this sample was selected basing on the strong premise that they have knowledge of SHG programme and are the primary beneficiaries of the SHG project implemented by Ntengwe for Community Development in Hwange district.

3.3 The SHG concept on building community social capital

What has been neglected by many studies on Self Help Groups is the ability of the innovation to bring together marginalized groups and rally them towards a common purpose to address any development challenges. Taken this way, the Self Help Groups in Hwange emerged as voluntary bodies of groups with common environmental challenges who through the group collectively share a common vision in addressing the environmental and climate change issues affecting the environmental development spectrum in the district. Ntengwe for Community Development started the Self Help Group Approach to addressing environmental degradation in 2013 under the support of the funding partner KinderNotHilfe a Germany based organization.

As of December 2017, Ntengwe had established 71 Self Help Groups, 6 Cluster Level Associations and 1 Federation with a total of 1254 women members who voluntarily pledged to fight climate change through a sustainable management of the environment in Hwange district. Of these, 29 SHGs and 3 CLAs with a total of 472 women members are found in the study area of Tshange ward. Given their ability to meet weekly discussing social and environmental issues, they contribute to a common fund that supports its members. The groups have been able to create a sense of belonging among members who now have a sense of worthy. Exemplified by the individual businesses, the community and societal work such as assisting schools, the elderly and the community at large, the programme has created strong social capital that can be relied on to tackle various environmental and development challenges in Hwange district.

The Self Help Groups in Tshange ward which have morphed together into a collective organ have gone beyond individual member benefits to addressing broader community and societal issues such as community service for the elderly, advocating for women to access land holdings, rendering assistance to local schools, addressing gender based violence and child abuse among a range of development challenges faced by women in Tshange ward. It is sufficient to note that the Self Help Group Approach implemented by Ntengwe in Hwange is very strong in creating a sustainable community that uses social interconnectedness to solve many of their challenges.

3.4 The building of economic sustainability

From the study, it was observed that the Self Help Groups contributed a joining fee of US\$1 per member and weekly savings varying from US\$0,25- 50 per group. Members are then able to borrow money from the group and repay it after four weeks with an interest rate of 10%. It is interesting to note that with a membership of 1254 women, the Self Help groups have created a ready and available capital market for women to access cheap and affordable capital. According to Mishi and Kapingura (2012) women in Zimbabwe have been largely excluded from accessing credits due to lack of collateral security and the need for formalized documentation. These are key bottlenecks which the Self Help Group approach overcomes. Table 1 shows the total savings that were circulating among Self Help Groups by December 2017.

Table 1: Self Help Group Saving as of December 2017

| Information | Figures as for December 2017 |
|---|------------------------------|
| Total number of functioning SHGs | 71 |
| Number of SHG members | 1254 |
| Number of Children in SHG member households | 3365 |
| Total number of functioning CLAs | 6 |
| Total Savings of all SHGs | \$20103, 50 |

Source: Ntengwe SHG quarterly report December 2017

The table shows that the 1254 members had managed to save US\$20,103.50 as at December 2017. This was the available capital for women to borrow from the groups' savings. Interestingly, SHG members had managed to engage in various small scale business including grocery retailing, fish and kapenta trading, cross border trading, clothes retail among the key major activities. As a result, women were laying the foundation for economic development and were contributing more seriously to the household income compared to before. Women alluded to having gained the ability to pay school fees, buy household foodstuffs, assets and livestock such as goats with the proceeds generated as part of the SHG process. It should be noted that there is a very strong link between the social-capital described above which lays the foundation for pooling resources together and give women access to capital. The capital has in turn enabled women to start small businesses that have resulted in reversals in the feminization of poverty. The Self Help Group Approach therefore becomes an encompassing intervention that promotes both social and economic sustainability, thereby contributing greatly to poverty reduction, and Sustainable Development Goals achievement.

3.5 The roles SHGs have played in promoting environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability is "the ability to maintain things or qualities that are valued in the physical environment", (Strutton, 2004). The Self Help Groups in Hwange district have played many critical roles in promoting environmental sustainability as found by the study. Some of the key roles discovered by the study included:

i) Women groups as mobilisers for environmental actions

The study found out that leaders in Self Help Groups had been targeted for capacity building in environmental issues including resilience building towards climate change. As part of their meetings and interactions with communities, the women groups acted as key mobilizers for other women to respond to environmental challenges such as deforestation and environmental cleanup campaigns. Due to the fact that they are already organized into groups, it has become easier to mobilize women for environmental activities collectively than appealing to individuals. In all the wards of operations, Self Help Groups conducted tree planting days and environmental cleanup campaigns as a way of ensuring that the environment is cared for.

ii) Women groups as capacity development multipliers

The study discovered that initially, only 120 women had been exposed to climate change and environmental management issues. However, through their efforts, knowledge on the environment had spread to the 1254 women and other community members. This shows that women groups can multiply the objectives of environmental sustainability to the entire communities if well organized as they can promote cross learning with community members. Indirectly therefore, family members of the 1254 women members of the self-help groups have also benefitted from information shared by the women on climate change.

iii) Women groups engaging in environmental regeneration efforts

It was found out that almost all the 29 Self Help groups in Tshange ward had been involved in efforts to try and regenerate the environment. This effort was done through clean up campaigns around business centres with community members and key stakeholders being mobilized for these events. Women had also been involved in tree planting events in a bid to promote reforestation in their communities.

iv) Women groups as Innovators

In Gamba village of Tshange ward, women have innovated a fuel efficient stove in order to avoid tree cutting as a means of getting fuel for energy. The fuel efficient stove was made out of home-made bricks and mud. The fuel efficient stove uses less firewood as the bricks and mud retain heat compared to open fires. These innovations also help adaptation against climate change and have been cascaded to other wards through community to community dialogues by the groups.

v) Women groups undertaking environmentally friendly practices

The SHG program has made a greater change in the communities as 30 women from the self-help groups are now plot owners in community gardens. One of the gardens, Kuguta Kulima in Lubweludile village of Tshange ward, was established after the women had successfully lobbied Ntengwe for Community Development to establish an irrigation garden. Many households were food insecure due to unreliable rain fed agriculture as climate change has completely affected crop production in the region. Within these gardens women undertake climate smart agricultural practices such as organic gardening, organic fishing and chicken farming which all

strive to protect the environment by reducing chemicals and fertilizers that destroy the environment.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion of this study is that the Self-Help Group approach is helping women support all the three pillars of the economic, social and environmental sustainability. This paper has further highlighted the activities implemented by women through the SHGs in fighting environmental degradation which is a mother of climate change. It has been indicated also that the effects of climate change are detrimental not only to the environment but also on human life. This is why the conservation of the environment becomes a key way to a sustainable community and development. The study recommends promoting a bottom up approach in supporting environmental sustainability and a sustainable management of the environment. There is need for collective action by all sectors of a society and the governance structures are recommended to engage different groups such as women and the youths in environmental policy making and development. There is a greater need to invest in environmental policies which are sound today so as to create a sustainable economy, environment and community for future generations in a million years to come.

Suggested areas for further research includes how women at the local level and using the self-help groups can influence decisions, attitudes and policies of decision and policy makers towards positive environmental practices. This is because as the study has shown, the Self Help group approach enables the social mobilization of women into a critical mass who can have an amplified voice with potential to influence development change.

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