Climate justice is a matter of water justice for women and girls: Gender responsive WASH as a metric for the GGA Framework

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that 90% of the climate disasters are water related, making immediate investments in climate adaptation crucial. The world is facing a 40% shortfall in freshwater supplies by 2030 with severe shortages in water-constrained regions. Since the UN Water Conference (March 2023), global consensus emerged to transition from a global water crisis to a water-secure world for all. Delivering on the human right to water requires a holistic and intersectional approach that combats climate injustice: communities that have contributed least to the causes of climate change are least resilient to its impacts and are respectively hit hardest. Intersectional in the sense that it should be acknowledged that women and girls are hit hardest by the climate and water crisis. Climate disproportionate affects the well-being and position of women and girls worldwide. They increasingly face challenges because of their responsibilities in fetching water, and their specific needs around pregnancy and menstruation. They have less means to protect themselves and require gender responsive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. Instead of promoting oil deals, COP28 should make immediate investments available for climate adaptation strategies benefitting women and girls, alongside integrating gender responsive WASH metrics into the GGA Framework to measure success. Investing in water justice for women and girls is key to climate action.

WATER JUSTICE AND GENDER EQUALITY

Today, around 2.2 billion people – or 1 in 4 – still lack safely managed drinking water at home. For example, in Nepal only 16% of the population uses safely managed drinking water services (2022). Through underlying cultural norms, women and girls in water scarce areas are responsible for fetching water in 80% of households worldwide. This leads to three major impacts on both the position of women and girls in their societies and their wellbeing.

- Fetching water becomes harder and more time-consuming due to the impacts of climate change. This brings women –and often their daughters- into 'time poverty': they are held back from position strengthening activities, such as school and work. This in turn prevents them from having their interests considered, for example by taking part in decision-making processes. Since women own less than 20% of land globally, their potential for decision-making power over water resources is already low.
- Water stress and the activity of fetching water in often remote places make women and girls particularly susceptible to gender-based (sexual) violence or sextortion, which is a form of corruption in which water is used as a commodity to bribe in exchange for sexual acts.
- Access to water and sanitation is a matter of health. Particularly women and girls are depended on safe access as they may menstruate or be pregnant. In lack of safe sanitation, their societal status may be negatively affected too.

Climate change is a water crisis, manifesting in either too much, too little or dirty water. Women and girls' position in their societies is strongly linked to the extent to which they have access to safe water and sanitation services. Improving water and sanitation services should be an integral part of climate adaptation to increase women's resilience. In turn, this will lead to reduced time poverty, improved health outcomes, amplifies women's voices, and increases meaningful participation in decision making, where they are now underrepresented.

GLOBAL GOAL ON ADAPTATION: INTEGRATE WATER AND GENDER EQUALITY

During COP26, Member States have agreed to adopt a framework guiding the Global Goal on Adaptation Under Article 7 of the Paris Agreement. By setting up the Glasgow Sharm El-Sheikh Work Program (GlaSS), which runs between COP26 and COP28, Parties are to finalise and adopt a framework containing clear methodologies, indicators, metrics and data sources to support the assessment of the overall adaptation process. Considering that the very last negotiations for the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) will take place at COP28, it must be ensured that water and gender justice are not excluded from an agreement. Nevertheless, achieving a truly holistic and sustainable approach for adaptation with regards to the restoration and protection of water sources, nature-based solutions should be in de core of the GGA framework.

The latest IPCC synthesis report underscores that adaptation measures will not necessarily have a positive impact on gender equality. It therefore urges for the explicit integration of promoting gender equality in investments in and planning for adaptation. Besides, the 8th and final GlaSS work program underscores that the GGA framework offers opportunities to accelerate action on gender equality and social inclusion.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN:

Promote safe access to water and sanitation as a metric for the GGA. It will tackle several sustainability matters cross-sectionally as

1) adaptation is regarded a matter of water
2) it is recognised that adaptation action offers opportunities for enhancing gender equality and social inclusion, and
3) gender equality and water access are interlinked and under pressure due to climate change.

Accordingly, safeguarding water sources in the GGA framework with 'access to water and sanitation' as north star may also prevent further degradation of the natural environment. It may contribute to reduced unabated climate impacts and therefore prevention of loss and damage. The metric will allow for improvements regarding SDG6 Clean Water and Sanitation, SDG5 Gender Equality, SDG3 Good Health and Well-being, and ecosystems functioning throughout SDG 14 Life Below Water and SDG 15 Life on Land.

ADAPTATION FINANCE

Promoting the integration of gender-responsive access to water and sanitation as a metric in the GGA framework may also offer opportunities for financing. Only 3% of all global climate finance goes towards water. In parallel, the adaptation finance gap is estimated between 194 billion and 366 billion dollars per year for developing countries, while right now 21.3 billion is spent globally on adaptation. Aligning how climate finance is allocated to adaptation and how it is directed towards water initiatives will increase its impact on societies and nature and may lead to more financial efficiency.

USE EXISTING METRICS

Finally, we urge Parties to define indicators based on existing systems. This is essential to relieve countries from excess reporting burdens and to enable acceleration on adaptation action. One example and proposal is integrating and amplifying the Joint Monitoring Program by UNICEF and the World Health Organization. This program measures progress on SDG 6 throughout the globe and metrices such as: safely managed drinking water, safely managed sanitation and basic hygiene services (i.e. basic handwashing facility with soap and water at home).

The indicators eventually should integrate existing assessments of water, intersecting with sanitation, public health and ecosystems. All these factors are essential to develop adaptation measures and monitoring progresses that will work in the benefit of all.

FOOTNOTES

1. UN report finds 90 per cent of disasters are weather-related
2. Global Commission on the Economics of Water. 2023. Turning the tide: A call to collective action. Available at: https://watercommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Turning-the-Tide-Report-Web.pdf
3. WHO & UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme 2023 Report: Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2022: special focus on gender. JMP 2023 Report
4. WHO & UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme 2023 Report: Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2022: special focus on gender. JMP 2023 Report
5. https://www.adaptation-undp.org/Impact2/
6. https://www.fao.org/3/cb1583en/cb1583en.pdf
7. Sex for Water: uncovering hidden forms of gendered corruption (waterintegritynetwork.net)
8. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf
9. https://unfccc.int/documents/632815 GlaSS WP 8
10. just-add-water-a-landscape-analysis-of-climate-finance-for-water.pdf (ircwash.org)
11. Adaptation Gap Report https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/43865/AGR23_ESEN.pdf?sequence=8
12. https://www.iisd.org/articles/insight/five-ways-global-goal-adaptation