

EXPLORING GENDER AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF WATER MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES IN THE DRC

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She is happy. She gets water in a few minutes, thanks to the work of men and women members of the water management committee of Tshitala village, Kasai Oriental Province, DRC (photo by Sam Phelps, CRS)

STUDY BACKGROUND

Women's engagement in water governance is crucial for sustainable water provision. However, many initiatives focus only on the number of female participants, ignoring power dynamics that may affect women's participation and decision-making. Therefore, this study aimed to document the gender dynamics of WMC to unpack to what extent this engagement was meaningful and to understand the gender dynamics of the water user committee.

In rural villages of the Kasai Oriental Province of the DRC, through the Budikadidi ("Self-Reliance") Development Food Security Activity, led by CRS and funded by USAID/BHA, women were elected as members of the seven water management committees (WMCs).

WMCs oversee water service provision, organize water fee collection, protect the water point, ensure maintenance, repair infrastructure, and engage communities to establish rules and an accountability system.

Gender dynamics include the interactions and relationships between women and men on the committees and the power-based dynamics that underpin these interactions. The study drew on a three-part framework of inclusive and effective water user committees: functionality, participation, and engagement (Agarwal 2001, van Wijk-Sijbesma 1985).

Water Committee Functionality	Water Committee Participation	Water Committee Engagement
Objectives What are the objectives of the committee? Gender differences?	Representation What types of people participate?	Agenda How is the committee agenda decided? Gender differences?
Challenges What challenges does the committee face? Gender differences?	Level of Participation How do they participate? Gender differences?	Modality How is the meeting approach decided? Gender differences?
Efficacy Does the committee meet its objectives? Gender differences?	Benefits and Backlash What are the benefits and backlashes for participation? Gender differences?	Timing How is the meeting timing decided? Gender differences?
	Gender Norms How do norms govern participation and leadership?	Location How is the meeting location decided? Gender differences?

This study was a partnership between Budikadidi and PRO-WASH using tools found in the online [qualKit](#)—an online toolkit of qualitative assessment tools for projects exploring gender equality, age, and social inclusion in WASH interventions.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

We purposively selected four WMCs to reflect different geographic locations and types of water infrastructure. In October 2022, a total of 26 individuals from these WMCs participated in eight focus groups (disaggregated by gender) and used pocket voting to rate different aspects of the committee's functionality. Responses were recorded in French and translated to English for analysis. Content analysis and descriptive statistics were conducted and compared between men's and women's groups for each committee. The results were compiled into the functionality-participation-engagement framework. Finally, the team classified the participation and engagement of women in each of the WMCs.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

As a rapid assessment, these results are not intended to be generalizable to all of Budikadidi. Rather, the study serves as a starting point for the program to continue to refine committee support modalities and identify key themes and insights.

Several of the activities related to pocket voting were noted as monotonous and potentially confusing. Additionally, it was difficult to maintain privacy in the focus group settings. This could influence the ability to ensure candid results from participants. In future studies, conducting a one-on-one private questionnaire with participants alongside focus groups could strengthen responses.

Each focus group was conducted by one facilitator who was also responsible for note-taking. This meant that some of the notes were less detailed than they could have been. Future studies could use two facilitators, allowing one to focus fully on taking notes. Additionally, while language barriers, distance, and internet connections limited opportunities for face-to-face training, future studies could conduct more rigorous facilitator training.

In the first committee, only one woman participated, making the focus group an interview.

RESULTS

Functionality

- Women were less likely than men to agree on the functionality and effectiveness of the committee.
- Gender differences were seen in engagement aspects such as communication, meeting time, location, and seating arrangements; these were sometimes worse for men than women.
- Men and women described poor community relationships, with women providing more detail on the challenges in fund collection and community relationships, trust of fund management, and management of water points.

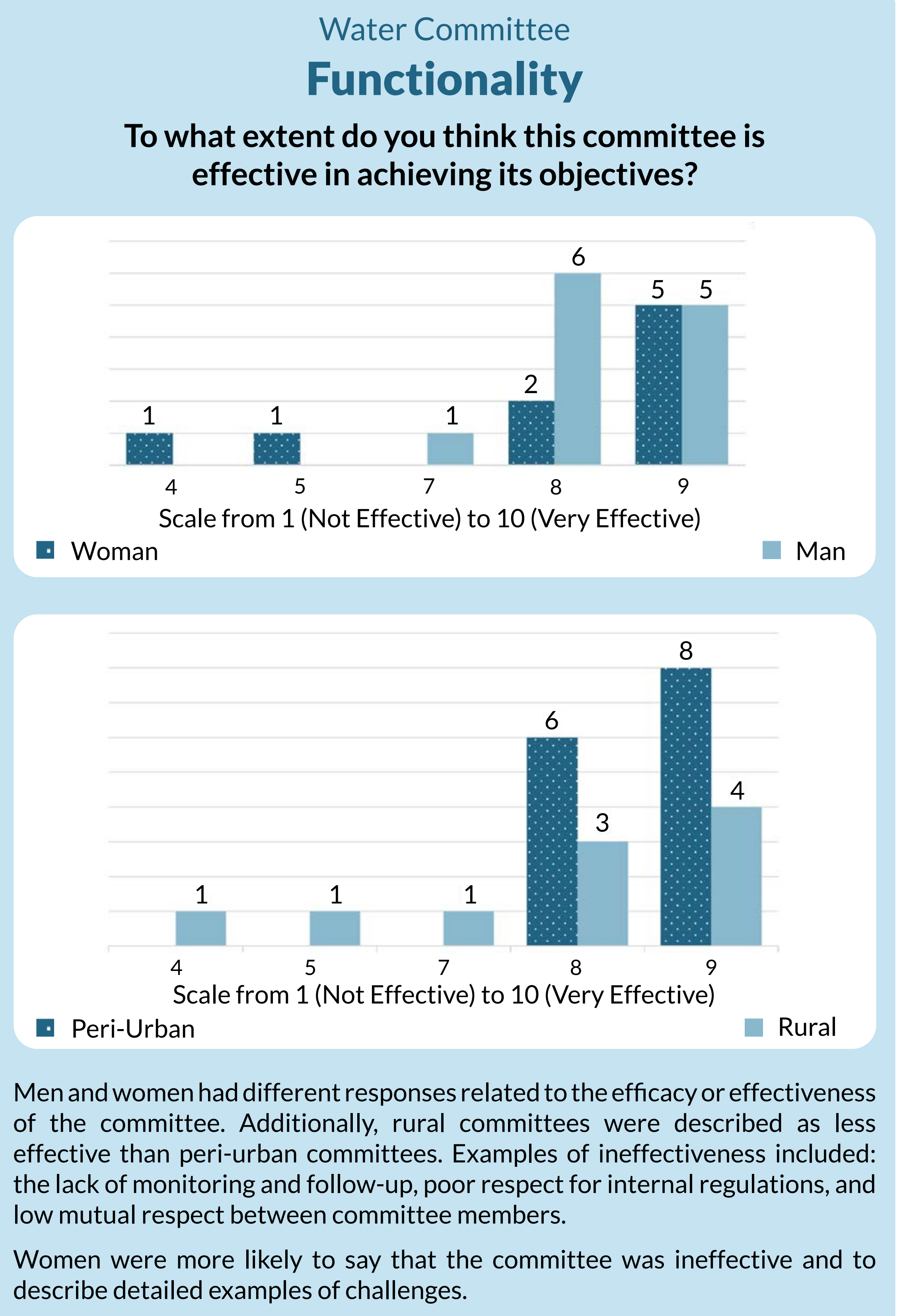
Participation

- In these committees, Budikadidi has done a good job of engaging women who are in a life stage (without small children at home) to support the committees best.
- The benefits of having women on the committee included improved collaboration, cohesion, equality, fairness, unity, "good climate," trust, and peace.

Engagement

- Gender differences were seen in engagement aspects such as communication, meeting time, location, and seating arrangements; however, these were sometimes worse for men than women.
- Women in leadership roles were less likely to agree that women could do these roles well, indicating a potential lack of confidence and/or capacity. However, none of the committees had nominal or passive engagement of women.
- Women tend to be more stable participants than men but often in non-decision-making roles.
- Men described women as often underestimated, and women described household work as a limiting factor to active participation.

"Women are listened to more than men at the water point, especially since they are the first users of water and know how to mobilize the community on the consumption of drinking water."
-Woman Respondent

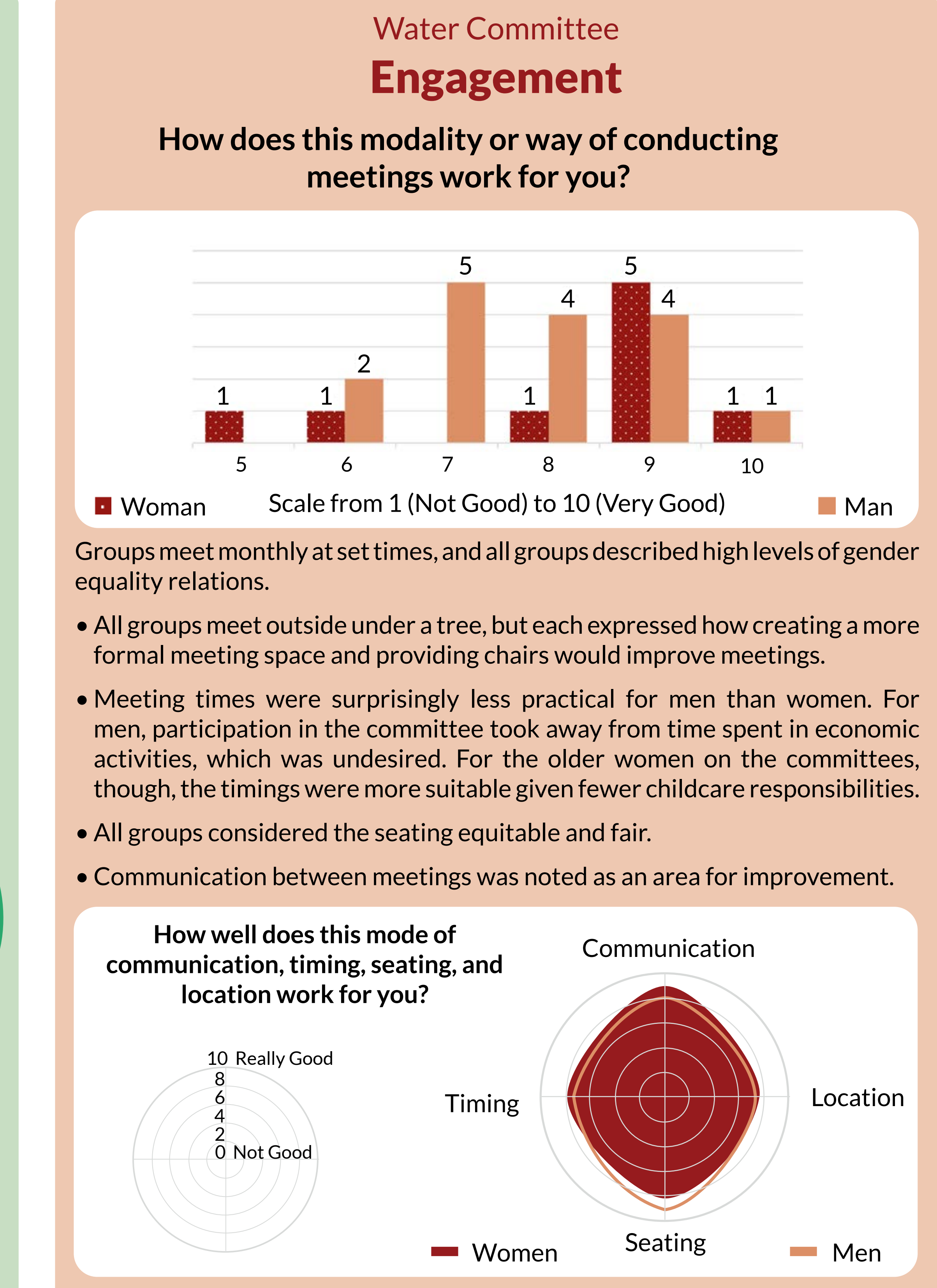
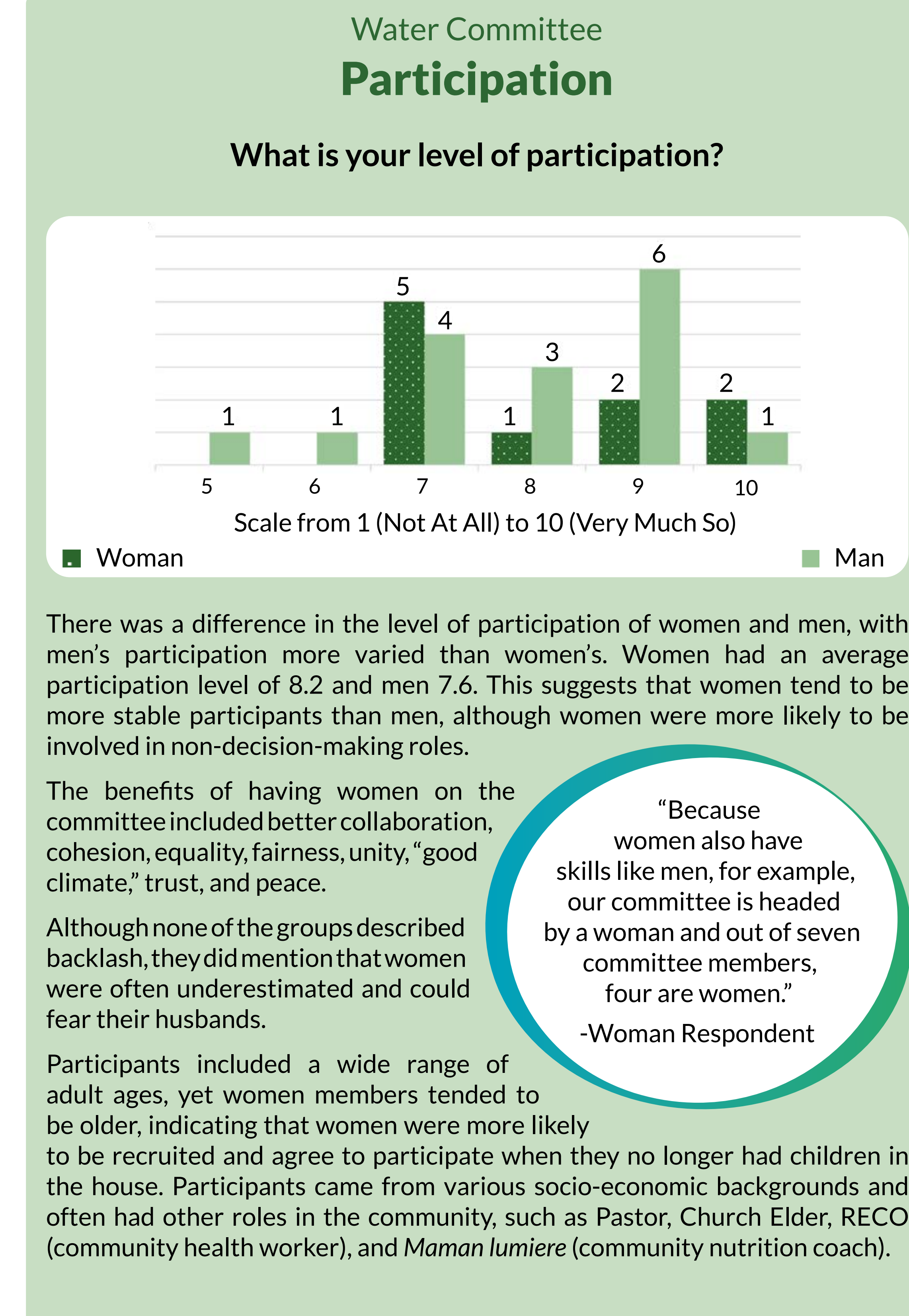


CLASSIFICATION OF COMMITTEES

Women's participation and engagement in each committee are classified into one of six types: nominal, passive, consultative, activity-specific, active, and interactive—drawing on the definitions from Agarwal (2001). It was initially hoped that committees would self-classify; however, this was deemed too complex in collaboration with the research team. The classification was conducted by comparing the roles of each woman participant against the descriptions of the six types of participation (Agarwal 2001); this was then aggregated by committee.

- Nominal** — membership in the group
- Passive** — being informed of decisions after the fact and silently attending meetings
- Consultative** — being asked an opinion in specific matters without guarantee of influencing decisions
- Activity-specific** — being asked to (or volunteering to) undertake specific tasks
- Active** — expressing opinions, whether or not solicited, or taking initiatives of other sorts
- Interactive** — having a voice and influencing decisions, holding positions as office bearers

1 Tuyau kumpala (Rural Borehole)	Activity-specific — This committee only has one woman, and although "she's brave," her engagement is specific to her treasury role in the committee.
2 Miabi/bena mbiya (Peri-urban Borehole)	Active — This committee has a woman president and more women than men. However, apart from the president, the other women are advisors and do not hold office. Interestingly, the woman president did not "strongly agree" when asked if she believed women could also be leaders—unlike her other committee members.
3 Kalubi a Lukusa (Rural Spring)	Consultative — This committee has two women members: one is a treasurer, and one is an advisor. While the women describe having a good rapport with the other committee members, there is no evidence that they are influencing decisions.
4 Miabi/nyikinyiki (Peri-urban Borehole)	Active — In this committee, men described lower levels of participation and poorer committee relationships than women. The three women held advisor, <i>fontainier</i> , and treasurer roles and appeared to be involved in some decision-making.



CONCLUSIONS

We recommend:

- Communicating the value of the committee and fee system to communities.
- Identifying opportunities to build women's confidence in leadership positions and exploring ways to increase young women's participation.
- Supporting committees to structure meetings to ensure good time management and consider rebranding the organizational structure to give each member a substantive role.

Overall, our study highlights the need for greater attention to gender dynamics in water governance initiatives to improve the inclusivity and effectiveness of WMCs. Future research could explore the barriers women face in participating in WMCs, incentives for being a committee member, and opportunities for enabling women's leadership.

Disclaimer: This research poster was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of the PRO-WASH and SCALE Award and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.