

Strengthening the role of women in agriculture and natural resource management

Case study: experiences of Women's Leadership Circles for Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WLCANs)



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Acronyms

FFF	Forest and Farm Facility
NRM	Natural resource management
REFACOF	African Women’s Network for Community Management of Forests (Réseau des Femmes Africaines pour la gestion Communautaire des Forêts)
WLCAN	Women’s Leadership Circles for Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (Cercle des femmes Leaders pour l’Agriculture et les Ressources Naturelles)
WOCAN	Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management

Summary

Rural women in sub-Saharan Africa depend mainly on forests and land as their main sources of income, medicine, food, water, energy and agricultural production and to support their families. In Africa, more than 56% of smallholder farmers are women. Several studies also show that 70–80% of rural women are leaders in the exploitation of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Yet they are mostly excluded from land ownership by customary laws that only recognise their usufructuary rights. Despite their important role, women do not own their lands or forests and cannot make important decisions about them. Because of this, they face several problems and challenges including a lack of security of tenure, lack of access to finance, poor access to technology, capital and markets, restrictive regulations for the development of women's forest enterprises, and low levels of organisation of women.

To help solve these problems, Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN) developed the concept of Women's Leadership Circles for Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WLCANs). Based on this concept, the African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests (Réseau des Femmes Africaines pour la Gestion Communautaire des Forêts or REFACOF) has now established six WLCANs in Cameroon, and one each in Liberia and The Gambia. The objective of the WLCAN groups is to organise and strengthen the capacities of rural women who are active in agriculture and natural resource management and to develop leaders among them capable of speaking with authority on behalf of their peers.

WLCANs have been very well received by the beneficiaries. The main successes include better organising, the smooth functioning of women's groups and associations and strengthening women's leadership. WLCANs have improved women's influence within their environment and their participation and influence in decision-making circles. They have also promoted women's economic empowerment thanks to the diversification of their income-generating activities, better networking between women and sectoral administrations, and the creation of spaces for dialogue between women and local elected officials.

The creation of WLCANs has been highly appreciated by rural women active in agriculture and natural resource management. The following main lessons have emerged:

- WLCANs help to strengthen women's leadership and enhance their influence within their communities.
- When rural women receive adequate support, they can take necessary action to address the various challenges.
- Mobilising, organising and building the capacity of rural women is imperative to help them improve their rights, status and influence on policies that affect them.
- Positive changes are still only at the local level, so it is very important to scale up the efforts already made by WLCANs. For example, some women leaders participate in municipal council meetings, some mayors have included women's activities in their action plans, and some women leaders have been elected as municipal councillors. It is therefore important to continue to support the establishment of WLCANs for a considerable impact.

WLCANs can provide opportunities for women. But key challenges remain:

- To date, WLCANs have not received any external financial support and women are struggling to build the required capital from their economic activities. Access to funding is essential to improve women's economic activities and for political advocacy at community, sub-national, national, regional and global levels.
- Access to technical training, technology and markets is also essential to help women develop real value chains in their respective sectors. Processing capacity, which adds significant value, is still very underdeveloped due to the lack of financial support.
- Women in WLCANs are experiencing the negative impacts of climate change, which has been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Many have experienced crop losses of up to 80% due to floods, droughts, heavy rains, and livestock mortality.
- Insecure women's land and forestry rights remain a key challenge. Despite their important contribution to agricultural and agroforestry production, rural women do not always have secure access to land, forests or forest resources.

As a way forward, REFACOF would like to establish WLCANs in other regions of Cameroon, The Gambia and Liberia and elsewhere. The ultimate goal is to support new national and regional WLCANs to increase the influence of women in these sectors. REFACOF would also like to support the development of women's community forestry enterprises. This will improve their economic status, and thus their influence.

Finally, WLCANs have enormous potential to address poverty, climate change impacts and inequalities of all kinds. To achieve this, development partners, donors and the private sector will need to take an interest in the activities of WLCANs and provide them with adequate support, which is essential for improving their resilience and their contribution to the sustainable development of our continent.

1 Introduction

In Cameroon, as in most of sub-Saharan Africa, rural women are almost entirely dependent on forests and land as their main sources of income, medicine, food, water, energy and agricultural production. They farm land to provide basic daily family subsistence and contribute 60–80% of local food production but lack security of tenure over these cultivable areas (FAO 2011). Studies have shown that more than 56% of smallholder farmers in Africa are women and that small-scale farms (less than two hectares in size) provide 30–34% of the world's food supply on 24% of the gross agricultural area (FAO 2021; FFF 2022). These small farms are more productive per unit area than large-scale monocultures and contain greater agrobiodiversity. Other studies also show that 70–80% of rural women are leaders in income-generating activities based on the exploitation of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and other agroforestry-related activities (see for example RECOFAF 2015b).

However, despite recognition of the important role that women play in the agricultural and forestry sector and their contribution to local economies, women continue to face multiple problems and challenges. In many cases, although women have access to land they have extremely limited control over it, as they do not own the land and cannot make decisions about its use (Denton 2002). They are mostly excluded from land ownership by customary laws that only recognise their usufructuary rights. Efforts to support the role of women in community forest management are still very weak. Women have poor access to technology, capital and national and international markets for NTFPs and regulations remain restrictive to the development of women's forestry enterprises.

In addition, the lack of organisation of women in agriculture, forest management and community enterprise development limits women's effective participation and contribution to the economic development of the country. There is an urgent need for rural women farmers and entrepreneurs to be empowered: women need support and capacity building to develop their leadership skills to ensure that their rights and interests are taken into account in policies and processes related to agriculture and natural resource management (NRM).

Recognising these challenges, the African Women's Network for Community Forest Management (REFACOF) aims to promote women's rights in Africa and influence policies and practices for gender equity in land and forest tenure. REFACOF has implemented the initiative called Women's Leadership Circles for Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WLCAN) (Cercle des femmes Leaders pour l'Agriculture et les Ressources Naturelles) originally developed by the Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN) network. The WLCAN approach was designed to help women improve their economic status to provide them with access to and an important place in decision-making mechanisms within their own countries and at all levels. The aim is that this will be achieved through improved structuring and economic empowerment that gives the women greater influence over the policies that govern their activities.

1.1 Creating a women's leadership programme

Faced with multiple problems, REFACOF realised that women needed support to organise and exchange knowledge among themselves and to increase their economic power and their capacity in leadership, negotiation and advocacy to influence policies in their environment. To achieve this, REFACOF set up a leadership programme for rural women.

One component was establishing WLCANs. The initiative was launched in Cameroon in 2015 following the successful experiences in South Africa of a member of Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN). REFACOF received financial support from WOCAN to launch WLCANs in Cameroon. This included the development and implementation of the project Women's Leadership Circles for Agriculture and NRM (WLCAN) in Sanaga Maritime and Nyong et Mfoumou Districts of Cameroon (see REFACOF and WOCAN 2015). At the same time, in order to continue mentoring and equipping women active in agriculture and natural resource management, REFACOF also positioned itself as an advocacy platform for women's land and forest rights by developing the project Promoting Women's Leadership and Advocacy for the Integration of Gender and Women's Interests in Sustainable Forest and Farm Management Policies and Mechanisms in Cameroon, The Gambia and Liberia (see REFACOF 2015a). Six WLCANs have now been established in Cameroon. Funded by the Forest and Farm Facility (FFF), this project has also enabled the further establishment of two additional WLCANs, one each in The Gambia and Liberia.

1.2 Why WLCANs?

WLCANs aim to support the mobilisation of rural women leaders to defend their rights and to actively integrate them into projects and programmes developed in the agricultural and natural resources sectors. In particular, WLCANs aim to structure and strengthen the capacities of rural women active in agriculture and NRM and to develop leaders among them who can speak with authority on behalf of their peers.

The effective establishment of WLCANs was done in six main stages. First, a study was done on the consideration of gender in rural development strategy documents in Cameroon (Abe *et al.* 2015). The aim was to assess the extent to which women's rights are taken into account by conducting a gender analysis of the legal texts of the various sectors concerned with natural resource management in order to contribute to the harmonisation of policies. Following this, a roadmap was developed for the implementation of the recommendations made in the study. Pilot areas were then selected and stakeholders identified, after which REFACOF worked to raise awareness of the WLCAN approach and mobilise the different stakeholders.

REFACOF then did a mapping exercise of women active in agriculture and NRM and produced a directory. This work allowed for exchanges between more than 500 people within organised women's groups and strategic sectoral services in the localities targeted by the initiative. Next, exchange meetings were held with women's associations to assess their level of functioning and to identify active women leaders within them. Sharing workshops were organised between the women and the sectoral administrations to inform the women about the support opportunities that already existed in various sectors (such as agriculture, forestry, livestock, fisheries and the environment) for the development of agricultural activities and the management of other natural resources. These meetings also aimed to facilitate interactions and promote dialogue between the women themselves as well as between women and the sectoral administrations in charge of NRM for more effective advocacy.

Women also received training on the WLCAN approach, leadership and advocacy and other relevant topics related to forest management. The WLCAN approach consists of mobilising rural women, helping them to organise themselves into groups and strengthen their capacities with the aim of making them real interlocutors for the consideration of women's rights and interests in policies, practices and processes related to NRM, agriculture and related activities. The idea was that in the long run, rural women and leaders themselves will participate in national and international debates and exchanges rather than having others speak for them.

1.3 Structure and functions of the WLCANs

WLCANs are umbrella bodies made up of rural women's associations that have decided to come together to improve their status in society. The main role of WLCANs is to advocate with politicians and other stakeholders to create an enabling environment for women's economic, sociocultural and political development. They are networks of women leaders who mobilise other women and provide them with organisational and institutional support in their communities.

The governing body of a WLCAN is elected by a general assembly of members for a renewable period of five years. It is made up of a very small bureau composed of a president, a secretary, a treasurer and the heads of the sectors. The members of the board are elected and work on a voluntary basis; they draw their income from their economic activities. The majority of these women are agriculture and agroforestry workers, pastoralists or fish producers. Women are also traders and processors of agricultural, forestry and pastoral products. These sectors are based on the different livelihoods developed by rural women and can change according to the zone or country. Sectors include for example production from orchards, and plantain and cassava plantations; harvesting and processing NTFPs; fishing and fish processing; and poultry rearing.

How WLCANs function is essentially based on applying the provisions of basic texts (statutes and internal regulations) that have been drawn up and adopted by the WLCANs. WLCANs also develop and implement their own action plans. WLCANs are almost entirely financed by the economic activities that their members carry out. REFACOF also provides some small financial support and

generally provides technical, organisational and institutional support to WLCANs. So far, WLCANs have not received any external support from development partners outside of REFACOF.

The women members meet in either ordinary or extraordinary general assemblies and also hold technical meetings. Depending on their needs and current events, meetings can be organised on a weekly, monthly or quarterly basis. Some ad hoc gatherings can also be organised to address specific situations in case of emergency. WLCANs also organise technical information and training sessions and run exchange and knowledge-sharing workshops. For technical meetings, WLCANs can call on experts in areas where they do not have in-house knowledge.

Statutory meetings such as ordinary general assemblies are chaired by the president of the WLCAN. Ordinary general assemblies are held once a year and extraordinary general meetings are convened when unexpected situations or unplanned events require them. The president is accountable for their WLCAN to the authorities, partners and other stakeholders. She is the main manager of the WLCAN. Other types of meetings can be chaired by any woman who knows the subject matter of the meeting. When WLCAN so wishes – and depending on the complexity of the topic to be discussed during a meeting – WLCAN can request that REFACOF facilitates a meeting for them. Statutory meetings are sanctioned either by minutes or simply by minutes of the meeting. The technical meetings are the subject of a technical report that summarises the main points of the meeting.

In general, impact monitoring is done annually. However, in some circumstances it can also be done instantly. For example, when WLCAN members were elected as municipal councillors in the city of Edéa in Cameroon, the impact was recorded instantly, as soon as the results of the municipal election were announced.

The WLCANs have also set up development and mutual aid funds and tontines (shared annuities). The aim is to assist members financially when required (for example, for births, baptisms, marriages, serious illness or death) but also to build up savings that can help them improve their living conditions and to support the development of their livelihoods and entrepreneurial activities.

2 Results and learning

To better understand learning related to WLCANs, this section focuses first on the actual results of the WLCAN initiative. It then discusses the changes observed at the level of beneficiaries.

2.1 Main results

The WLCAN initiative has had the following main results:

- A directory of women's associations active in agriculture and NRM is now available in each country, based on a mapping exercise. The directory provides detailed information on the nature of the group, their activities, how each group operates, its legal existence, its experience of networking, its support partners, etc.
- The women are better informed of existing support opportunities in the various sectors in which they work (such as agriculture, forestry, livestock, fisheries and the environment) for the development of agricultural activities and the management of other natural resources.
- The women participate in exchange and knowledge-sharing meetings and are trained on a variety of technical topics according to their needs, such as forestry, sustainable agriculture, climate change adaptation, access to markets, communications, how to hold meetings and how to run a group or an association.
- Beneficiaries have also been trained on women's leadership and advocacy skills to enable them to better promote women's rights and interests.
- The initiative also supports women's networking and the creation of collaborative platforms between women's networks and decisionmakers.
- All WLCANs have also developed action plans.

2.2 Observed changes

The WLCANs have brought about significant changes to the lives of the participating rural women in Cameroon, Liberia and The Gambia. These changes can be seen both in the structuring and functioning of women's groups and associations and in the development of collective activities.

Thanks to the support of REFACOF, the women's groups are better structured and increasingly better organised. They have statutes and internal regulations that they are trying to apply.

With regard to the development of collective activities by women, they have diversified their activities and are gradually improving their incomes, their living conditions and their self-esteem and, consequently, their decision-making power within their households and their communities. All of this is the result of the capacities acquired by WLCAN members following training provided by REFACOF. For example, training on women's economic empowerment has helped them to further develop income-generating activities, while training on women's leadership skills has enabled them to develop attitudes, aptitudes and leadership qualities. By organising around collective activities, they have improved incomes and reduced production costs and other expenses, for example, by establishing community cassava fields, plantain fields and orchards. The WLCANs also organise themselves around the processing of products and group sales (see Box 1).

Box 1. Organising around collective activities to improve incomes

Following training provided by REFACOF on the economic empowerment of women and the importance of diversifying activities and sources of income, a common initiative group¹ called Les Laboureurs du Littoral (meaning coastal labourers) in Cameroon established a small plantain-processing unit, to produce and process plant material (seeds) and for marketing plantain-based agri-food products such as plantain flour, chips, cakes, biscuits and wine. This has allowed them to obtain a higher value for their products compared to selling plantain in its raw state.

Another key result is that some WLCAN women leaders now participate in municipal council meetings, thanks to the dialogue established between these communal executives and the women leaders. Indeed, when the WLCANs were first created, REFACOF facilitated the networking of women with the strategic sectoral administrations (decentralised services of the state), specialised structures, administrative authorities and decentralised territorial communities. The purpose of this networking is to facilitate interaction and promote dialogue between women and other stakeholders. It is therefore in this framework that one or two representatives of the women leaders are regularly invited to take part in the sessions of the municipal council. This gives them the opportunity to present their expectations and grievances as well as their activities to the council members.

As a result of a series of dialogues between WLCANs and mayors, as well as the implementation of certain initiatives, some mayors have also committed to supporting the implementation of certain women's activities. In order to do so, some mayors have started to integrate women's activities into their commune action plans. This is important because this means those activities are allocated a budget for implementation. This is a long process that has already been initiated by some town halls of the Sanaga Maritime division in Cameroon. REFACOF supports both the town halls and the WLCANs so that budgeting is done in the interests of both parties. To date, the process is at the level of the municipal councillors who must take a deliberation from the municipal council accepting that certain activities deemed relevant by the WLCANs can be included in the commune action plan. So far, only one municipal council has given its approval. However, this is an ongoing process, supported by advocacy from WLCANs with the facilitation of REFACOF.

3 Conclusion

The creation of WLCANs has been highly appreciated by rural women active in agriculture and natural resource management. After a few years of operation of WLCANs, the following main lessons have emerged:

- WLCANs are a mechanism for strengthening women's leadership and enhancing their influence within their communities.
- When rural women receive adequate support, they are able to take the necessary actions to address the various challenges they face in relation to their activities and their position in their environment.

¹ Under Cameroonian law, a common initiative group is a freely created autonomous and private organisation that belongs to its members and is administered, financed and controlled by them.

- The mobilisation, structuring and capacity building of rural women remains an imperative without which it will be difficult for them to improve their rights, status and influence on the policies that govern their sectors of activity.
- Positive changes are noticeable but still only at the local or community level, so it is very important to scale up the efforts already made by WLCANs.

However, even though WLCANs provide opportunities for women, there are still many challenges to be overcome if WLCANs are to drive changes in policies and practices necessary for the socioeconomic development of local people, particularly women. The main challenges are as follows:

- Access to funding is essential to improve women's economic activities and to carry out political advocacy at community, sub-national, national, regional and global levels. To date, WLCANs have not received any external financial support and women are struggling to build the required capital from their economic activities. Unfortunately, the situation is very difficult and has been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the efforts of the WLCANs are becoming more and more limited.
- Access to technical training, technology and markets is also essential. REFACOF's small efforts are not enough to help women develop real value chains in their respective sectors. So far, the production of most WLCANs is artisanal. It is done using rudimentary technology or equipment and is sold on the local market. Processing capacity, which adds significant value, is still very underdeveloped due to the lack of financial support.
- Vulnerability to climate change has been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Women in WLCANs are experiencing the negative impacts of climate change: many have experienced crop losses of up to 80% due to floods, severe droughts, heavy rains in the off-season, and livestock mortality due to plagues. These challenges are completely beyond the control of WLCANs.
- Insecure women's land and forestry rights remain a key challenge. Despite their important contribution to agricultural and agroforestry production, rural women do not always have secure access to land, forests or forest resources.

As a way forward, REFACOF would like to continue the establishment of WLCANs in other regions of Cameroon, The Gambia and Liberia and several other REFACOF member countries. The ultimate goal is to support the establishment of national and regional WLCANs in order to increase the influence of women in these sectors. REFACOF would also like to support the development of women's community forestry enterprises so that they can improve their economic status, which will enable them to improve their influence in their environment.

Finally, WLCANs have enormous potential to address poverty, climate change impacts and inequalities of all kinds. To achieve this, development partners, donors and the private sector will need to take an interest in the activities of WLCANs and provide them with adequate support, which is essential for improving their resilience and their contribution to the sustainable development of our continent.

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