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Learning Paper:

Lessons from Co-Creation of a Platform for Women in Water Governance in the Mekong Region



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Project Background

Women are frequently excluded from decision-making processes related to water, river, and environmental governance and management, despite well-articulated policies and agendas to include women and other socially marginalized groups. The inclusion of women's voices requires addressing a multitude of barriers, some of which are deeply ingrained in the way that cultures and societies operate, and even how women are conditioned to value themselves - and therefore not easily addressed, even with valuable and well-meaning global and regional directives.

In 2019 and 2020, at the [Women and Rivers Summits](#), women leaders in water and river governance—including community leaders, activists, and members of civil society—expressed an interest in a safe, inclusive digital space to support collaborative work across cultures and languages in order to balance the male-dominated arenas of environmental decision-making and governance. A pilot scoping study (2021) identified additional barriers including cultural biases leading to women having less time for and access to digital tools such as smartphones, computers and affordable data. They are also less likely to have the skills to use digital tools.

In February 2023, the 12-person all-female steering committee convened to begin the process of co-creating this safe space, with security safeguards, a robust governance structure, and initial wireframe ideas for the online space, backed up by technology infrastructure that establishes a baseline of no electricity, no hardware and connectivity, no literacy or digital literacy, with a minimum of start-up funds to build the necessary infrastructure. The project's initial pilot region is the Lower Mekong Basin countries and Myanmar, but engages a gender-balanced Advisory Board that brings global perspectives and transdisciplinary expertise.

Methodology

These lessons are based on a one-year longitudinal research project that followed the WIWGP co-creation process through a mix of interviews, observation and surveys. This includes observation of online meetings and two in-person workshops (23-24 February and 12-21 September 2023), two rounds of interviews with Steering Committee members and other members of the project team, and post-workshop surveys after each workshop.

The methodology and analysis was based on a conceptual framework developed from a mix of literature review and consultation and discussion with the Steering Committee during the first workshop. It includes the following factors –

Framework of the Project	Intergroup Dynamics	Knowledge and Information	Process of Co-Creation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Background and motivation of facilitators and instigators•Selected participants and their roles outside the project.•Commitment of participants•Timeline•Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Factors including gender, ethnicity, professional background•Relationships and trust•Decision-making and common values•Culture of participation and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Common understanding of context and analysis of problem to be solved•Common knowledge of technical terms and other key information•Communication and information-sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Means and methods of engagement and communication (online and offline)•Setting and process of activities

Gender and Co-Creation

Many co-creation projects specifically target women's inclusion and empowerment, particularly in projects that seek to overcome inequalities in women's access to technologies and to promote gender equality. (UNESCO, 2022; UN Women, 2022).

There is a risk that patterns of gender inequality will be replicated in a co-design process, even one with gender-equality objectives. (Cumbula & Sabiescu, 2013; Anjea, et al. 2022). This may include inter-group dynamics in mixed-gender co-creation processes, e.g. the risk that men will dominate discussions. (Helga, 2022) In addition, according to interviews conducted for this research, women working in civil society tend to take on more voluntary work like networks and coalitions, in addition to the unpaid household and caring duties taken on primarily by women (World Bank, 1996; ESCAP, 2019). This may mean that they face more time constraints to participate in co-creation. Women also have lower rates of access to technologies and digital skills (UN Women, 2022). This may impact their participation in a co-creation process that seeks to build a digital tool or platform.

Thus, co-creation processes aiming to address gender-equality objectives using digital tools must consider two key factors – preventing the replication of gender inequality within the co-creation process, and ensuring that women who participate in the process (and target users of the end product) have sufficient digital skills and access to technology to fully participate in co-creation and use the end product. Hassendorder, et al, suggest forming 'sub-groups' for participants who may feel more comfortable in a homogenous environment, including women (2015). Other adaptations may include flexible scheduling, acceptance of a slower process, extra efforts to up-skill co-creation participants, and keeping accessibility in mind when designing the end product. (World Bank, 1996; UNICEF, 2021). Done well, co-creation can have a positive impact on the women participating, contributing to overall goals of women's inclusion empowerment. (UNESCO, 2022) Co-creation processes that meaningfully include women can also ensure women end-users are able to access and use the end product. (GSMA, 2022).

For the Women in Water Governance Platform, the Steering Committee decided not to include men as Steering Committee members in order to create an environment where all participants were comfortable sharing and participating. In the first year, having a women-only space has helped the committee members build trust and strong relationships based on a common identity not only as women, but as strong women from or working with indigenous communities, and women who often challenge their community's expectations of them.

Lessons for Co-Creation

1. Sufficient, flexible and long-term funding is essential.

Costs involved with co-design of technical products include the facilitator(s), convening costs including travel, pay/honorarium for participants and money for technical development. Each of these has an important role in the process – sufficient in-person meetings help with trustbuilding and meaningful discussion, paying participants for their time may help them commit more time and prioritize the project, and the right technical developers make the vision into reality. Relying on volunteer labor for any of the above positions risks creating power imbalances and losing commitment from participants.

Funding should also be flexible and longterm due to the slow pace and uncertainty of the parameters of the final product.

2. Accept a slow process, including consensus-making instead of directive decision-making, and an iterative process.

Meaningful co-design, especially between participants who don't know each other and work in sensitive contexts, takes time. In the beginning, a long process of trust-building is essential. In the first in-person workshop for the Women in Water Governance Platform, much time was spent on teambuilding activities. This investment of time helped participants tackle tough discussions later in the process.

“I think we’ve decided we would rather be consensus based than directive. We knew it would be hard to get the right people in the room in order to make decisions and move forward. It’s slow, it’s going to continue to be slow, and it’s going to have a different flux as it grows and contracts.” – Facilitator

3. Shared identities help with group cohesion.

During the formation of the WIWG Steering Committee, there was a conscious decision-making process of whether to accept men on the committee. All invited members, all women at the time, were polled about whether they were comfortable with men joining. The decision was made to allow men to be part of the Advisory Group but not the Steering Committee itself. This decision had a positive impact on the inter-group dynamics of the Steering Committee, as members could build trust based on their roles and experiences as women. Not only were members all women, but they had shared identities as women who were not “well-behaved” according to their community norms. In addition, most members were indigenous or had long experience working with indigenous women, a further layer of shared identity and values.

4. Create a balance between abstraction and practicality.

Co-creation involves discussion of abstract concepts and goals, like empowering women, and practical project management. Creating a balance between those two ways of working is important to maintain engagement of all members. During WIWGP Steering Committee workshops, there was a constant cycle between discussing more abstract, long-term concepts and practical steps. Practicality also

includes showing and experiencing examples of the type of work the project seeks to support. For example, during one WIWGP workshop, the Steering Committee went on a site visit to a project run by women in an indigenous community that helped concretize what kind of work the project seeks to support.

“[I enjoyed the] site visit because it was inspiring to work with the community and see what it takes to give resource-connected women a space to showcase the beautiful things they have done.” – SC member, September 2023

5. Be clear about roles to build ownership and accountability.

It can be hard for a co-creation process to shift ownership and accountability from those who started the process (often called initiators and/or facilitators) to all co-creation participants. Participants may be hesitant to take initiative without group consensus and may be unsure of their own roles. To build ownership and promote accountability among members, it is important to define roles and expectations. This can be done by identifying concrete ‘next steps’ and asking members to volunteer to take them on. Facilitators/initiators should consider making funding available to support participants’ work on concrete tasks to enable them to dedicate their time.

6. Early agreement on core values helps with decision-making.

In the WIWGP Steering Committee, core values include empowering women, respect for privacy and security, promotion of local/indigenous knowledge, and data sovereignty. Referring to these core values has helped make decisions and resolve disagreements. For example, in discussions about whether to use existing social media platforms, participants referred to the values of privacy and data sovereignty to decide against hosting the platform on existing social media which would not allow for participants to retain ownership of their data and control over their own privacy.

Recommendations for Co-Creation Practitioners and Funders

1. **Plan for flexibility.** Project plans and funding should allow for changes and adjustments as the co-creation participants find their way of working together.
2. **Plan sufficient funding for in-person convenings, stipends for participants and technical roles.** In this project, in-person convenings were crucial to building trust and moving the project forward. In addition, some participants mentioned it was hard for them to give enough time to the project on a volunteer basis, with many other tasks. This is even more important for women, who often have household and caring work outside of their paid employment. Finally, ensuring the right technical experts to design online platforms or any other digital tools also requires sufficient funding from the early stages.
3. **Carefully choose participants who have some kind of shared identities, even amongst diversity.** Participants in the WIWG project come from many countries and backgrounds, and work on different issues or with different working styles. However, they have strong common identities, not only as women but women who are “not well-behaved” according to their community and societal norms, and who are or work with indigenous people. These identities were key to building trust.
4. **Start slowly and emphasize trust and relationships in the early stages.** Facilitation should focus more on process than outcomes, especially in the beginning as group dynamics are evolving and participants are getting to know each other.
5. **Work toward concrete tasks and clear understanding of roles and responsibilities.** One of the biggest challenges to members taking initiative in the WIWG project was their own uncertainties around their roles. Identifying concrete tasks that participants can volunteer for helps them see their own roles in the bigger picture.