Country: Moldova - Principal Organisation: Bios

ABSTRACT

Since 1995, NGO Bios has worked on sustainable agriculture and environmental protection for rural communities’ development in the Republic of Moldova. By using a participatory and inclusive approach, Bios has offered training to 10 Water Users Associations for Irrigation to raise their awareness of the social, economic and environmental implications of irrigation and assist them in updating their Environmental and Social Management Plans. This has ensured more sustainable land, water and ecosystem management.

ILC COMMITMENTS

- STRONG SMALL-SCALE FARMING SYSTEMS
- EQUAL LAND RIGHTS FOR WOMEN
- LOCALLY-MANAGED ECOSYSTEMS
- INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING
- TRANSPARENT AND ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION
In the period 1994-2010 Moldovan agriculture has seen a dramatic decline, one of the deepest in the group of transition countries. Despite the generally high level of soil fertility, today agricultural productivity in Moldova is low. Small peasant farms, on average 1.5 hectares, are the most vulnerable to extreme climate conditions. The declining competitive advantage of the agricultural sector and the diminishing income of the farmers have resulted in a shrinking output of high value-added agricultural products such as apples, tomatoes, grapes and meat; and an expansion of the areas sown with wheat and sunflower. Between 1994 and 2010, the total area of orchards have decreased by 30% and that of vineyards by 20%, while the land sown with grains has increased of 50% of the total area of crops in 1994 and 65% in 2004. In the 1990s irrigated land in Moldova accounted for 340,000 hectares, while in 2010, 5,000 hectares. Farmers cannot finance investing in higher input crops.

The Irrigation Sector Reform Activity is one of four integrated activities comprising the Transition to High-value Agriculture (THVA) Project, a project funded by the Millennium Challenge Corporation and aimed at increasing rural incomes by stimulating growth in irrigated high-value agriculture and at promoting an institutional and policy environment conducive to irrigated agriculture. NGO Bios was responsible for the empowerment of 10 Water Users Associations for Irrigation (WUAs) to develop, update and implement Environmental and Social Management Plans (ESMPs). The activities were implemented in the period 2010-2015.
Through the THVA project an efficient model for the management of infrastructure investments was developed and tested by providing assistance to Water Users’ Associations for Irrigation established by farmers, and facilitating their access to funding and irrigated areas expansion. WUAs were trained on how to practice high performance agriculture without damaging the environment. Due to the knowledge acquired by WUA members on agro-environmental issues and implementation of ESMPs, local farmers have started to perform a more viable type of agriculture, which takes into consideration environmental and social issues. The rehabilitation of the irrigation systems has enabled agricultural producers to apply modern cultivation technologies, increase the agricultural production, and increase threefold the incomes deriving from growing fruit and vegetables by setting higher prices due to the availability of water for irrigation. The overall project has rehabilitated 10 irrigation systems in 30 localities, which irrigate more than 12,000 hectares of land farmed by 6,000 farmers across the country.

The WUAIs bring together land users. Their development and strengthening made the farmers capable to jointly manage their land. Almost all members of WUAIs are small-scale farmers. WUAIs support small-scale farming systems, guarantee gender justice in relation to land and ensure transparency and accountability and inclusive decision-making processes over land. At the same time, WUAIs also make the evaluation of the social and environmental impact of agriculture possible. In the longer term this ensures a sustainable ecosystem management.
Needs assessment and consultation for developing a training programme. The first step was a needs assessment and a proper participatory consultation with the 10 WUAIs about their knowledge of irrigated agriculture, the impact of irrigation on the environment and the social implications of irrigation. Results were taken into consideration when a training programme was developed. This included sections about the environmental and social impacts of irrigation and their consequences, information on the measures to prevent or mitigate the environmental and social issues that can arise at the stage of irrigation system rehabilitation, as well as of ESMP development. The training was adapted to the relevance of different topics to the specific WUAIs. Some topics – such as understanding the legal framework, how to assess the quality of water, the approaches for the calculation of the irrigation regimes, or the maintenance of moisture regimes – were common to all WUAIs; others – such as assessing soil quality and its suitability for irrigation, irrigation regimes with respect to crops – were only of interest to certain WUAIs.

A theoretical and practical training. The training was performed according to a combination of theoretical and practical presentations with the application of a participatory approach. One of the main constraints of all WUAIs was the lack of knowledge on irrigation. For this reason, NGO Bios chose to discuss – alongside the more theoretical aspects regarding the social impact of irrigation and the development of ESMPs that are in line with the international conventions and the national and local action plans – some practical issues, such as how to best measure soil humidity, how to maintain optimal irrigation regimes of the soils for the farm crops in each of the WUAI, organic farming practices, etc.

A participatory and inclusive approach. Trainees always solicited women’s opinion on irrigation matters, as they frequently showed to have a wider perspective focusing not just on economic indicators, but also on the benefits for families and children, including access to healthy food and non-polluted water. Training participants, particularly women and other vulnerable or underrepresented groups were encouraged to present their views and comments. They were also included in the team for monitoring and coordinating the construction and operational phases of the ESMPs development.

Updating the Environmental and Social Management Plans. In 2014 and 2015 Bios facilitated the updating of all ESMPs. They organised workshops and round tables to share lessons learned, during which WUAIs presented their experience and learned from their colleagues’ good practices in planning, monitoring and implementing ESMPs. Farmers were given guidance on the main aspects to address during the updating: water quality, water deficit, soil quality, requirements of farm crops, relief conditions, environmentally friendly practices, social and gender aspects to be taken into consideration at all stages of the decision making process and project implementation, including the access of WUAIs members to water in the critical periods of water deficiency or during severe droughts.

Developing guidelines. Bios developed guidelines for irrigated agriculture, ESMPs development, their updating and monitoring which are currently used by WUAIs.
3 THREE FACTORS OF SUCCESS AND REPLICABILITY

1. A bottom-up participatory approach is effective to empower people and organisations on sustainable agricultural practices.

2. An important factor of success in preventing and reducing the negative environmental and social impact of irrigation is mainstreaming environmental and social awareness in agricultural activities by developing, implementing and monitoring the implementation of Environmental and Social Management Plans (ESMPs) for Water Users Associations for Irrigation (WUAIs) together with their members.

3. Training WUAIs members in environmental and social issues related to irrigation and highly intensive agriculture, providing them with skills, motivation and self-confidence to develop ESMPs, holding them accountable for their implementation, and contributing to their empowerment on the sustainable use of natural resources can increase the productivity of farm crops and reduce poverty.

LESSONS LEARNED

Civil society organisations should organise study visits to WUAIs for learning from their experience of cooperation in using resources sustainably. The experience of the WUAIs should be taken as a model when organising training events on the environmental and social implications of economic activities. It is important to use with farmers a language that is not purely scientific and is accessible to them.

Policy makers in the Republic of Moldova provide little support to irrigation and environmentally friendly practices. Raising awareness on the work done with WUAIs could assist in achieving public support on a number of issues faced by the farmers, such as droughts during the vegetation period or pollution caused by the erratic use of agricultural chemicals. Additional support could contribute to slowing the process of depopulation of villages and the disintegration of rural communities.
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Compact Moldova. Newsletter, April 2015. Heading for sustainable economic growth
