To break barriers, give women more access to climate finance

By Lean Alfred Santos
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Women displaced by heavy flooding in 2010 queue to fetch water in Pakistan. Women are among the most affected during climate-related disasters. Photo by: Asian Development Bank

When climate-related disasters strike, everyone is affected — but when it comes to health and household management, women tend to suffer more than men.

Despite this, women and gender issues are yet to be included completely in large-scale climate finance facilities — mechanisms instituted to mitigate disaster effects and spur climate adaptability in development work — due to several challenges, including lack of information and accessibility.

For climate finance mechanisms to become truly sustainable, impactful and comprehensive, putting women at the center of climate action by breaking barriers on accessibility is vital, experts agreed in a recent online conversation hosted by the Asian Development Bank.

“Only when women are recognized as important contributors to address climate change — change agents — and actively sought out as relevant stakeholders are climate funds structures changing to allow more women to benefit from climate finance,” said Liane Schalatek, associate director of U.S.-based group Heinrich Böll Foundation.

This expert further explained that the issue of accessibility in climate finance particularly with women is (relatively) based on the basic economic principle of demand and supply.

“We see two components in breaking down access to climate funds. They have demand and supply elements,” Schalatek explained. “Demand being women’s ‘access to knowledge, and low carbon technology.”

One of the best examples of putting women at the forefront of climate finance during disasters is when Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines in November 2013. The incident showed that one of the most severely affected sectors of society are women — which hold their families together in the aftermath of such a calamity, especially in terms of health, food, and sanitation.

“Women play a frontline role in managing energy, waste and water resources and are uniquely positioned to contribute in the fight against climate change,” noted Karen Palmer, ADB communications specialist. “Yet few would say that women have easy access to multi-million dollar global climate funds.”

Stumbling blocks

To break these barriers, there are a number of obstacles that need to be eliminated. Some of these challenges include the need to shift to a more community-focused finance facility, information dissemination, and inclusion of climate issues in every facet of governance, to name a few.

“We need to change the structure of existing funds to facilitate climate investments that are more community and beneficiary focused,” Schalatek said. “Some of the recent ‘reluctance’ in climate funds to fund women’s activities directly is related to scale: most funds focus on economies-of-scale in order to lower transaction costs.”

Linda Adams, ADB social development specialist for Southeast Asia, added that sustainability of climate finance facilities and initiatives can be ensured “through [the] adoption of gender dimensions in national and sub-national climate change strategies and action plans, and incorporation in project screening processes.”

The Green Climate Fund, established in 2010 by the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, is currently one of the most advanced climate finance facilities in the international community — in contrast with the Clean Technology Fund, tagged as “gender-blind” — which Schalatek hopes to entrench a more “gender-sensitive approach” moving forward.

Local organizations, especially women’s groups, should have easy access to climate finance if needed. The GCF, for example, mostly focuses (initially) on extending climate assistance directly to governments, making the assistance received by local groups as a “trickle-down” sum — and making the process longer and less efficient.

Another challenge is the lack of available knowledge and information for women to actively participate in climate finance schemes, that would have a spillover effect on the kind of transparency and accountability needed for these facilities to work effectively.

“One huge challenge is the lack of accountability. There are no gender auditing mechanisms in place for climate funds that take a systematic approach at reviewing all climate projects,” pointed out climate finance expert Natalie Harms. “There are no reliable data regarding how many climate projects are actually gender responsive and how many mitigation projects out there impact women positively.”

Private sector involvement

On the task of making climate finance accessible to everyone, the private sector has a very important role to play, according to the climate finance experts.

Lauren Sorkin, ADB climate change expert based in Vietnam, explained that business or impact investors can bridge several climate finance gaps not only in shared responsibilities but also in reaching out to communities at the deepest level.

"On impact investors, this is a group that wants to see projects that deliver benefits to women and quick results," she explained. "What is important is to provide practical tools for measuring gender co-benefits while demonstrating lasting on the ground improvements in environment and livelihoods."

Even the GCF has acknowledged the growing role of the private sector, not just in climate-related issues, but in the greater international development sphere, according to Schalatek.

"It is indeed important to work with the private sector, and the new GCF will have a focused Private Sector Facility. In order to benefit women, it is crucial to focus on the segments of the private sector where women as entrepreneurs and customers are most dominantly involved in," she concluded.