



# FOLUR

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*Learning from Success*



## A Forest Landscape Initiative Demonstrating Environmental Benefits and Empowering Women

An investment project in Mexico is enabling women from Indigenous and local communities to take an informed and active role in sustainable forest management. It provides them with access to finance, building capacity, and technical proficiency to develop the necessary skills to market forest and agroforestry products, as well as improve their incomes and livelihoods.

In this brief, we explore how the inclusion of several affirmative actions in the design and implementation of project activities has allowed Indigenous women to engage in productive undertakings despite insecure rights. We examine how women are being gradually integrated into decision-making and empowered in land management processes within their communities, creating both environmental and social benefits.

Uniquely for a project implemented in multiple sites with a principle focus on reducing deforestation, the Mexico Dedicated Grant Mechanism (DGM) for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Project, and use of the W+ Standard—an internationally recognized certification standard that measures women's empowerment—provide us with hard evidence of how such efforts are not only reaping environmental benefits, but measurable and valuable social gains as well. This has long posed a significant challenge, requiring innovative approaches to effectively capture full impact and value of projects.

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*The Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration (FOLUR) Impact Program is a seven-year, US\$345 million initiative funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and led by the World Bank. Seeking to transform food and land use systems, the program consists of a Global Knowledge Platform (GP) and 27 country projects.*

*Work at the country level focuses on accelerating action in landscapes and across value chains for eight key commodities, including livestock, cocoa, coffee, maize, palm oil, rice, soy and wheat. For more information on the FOLUR Program visit: <https://www.folur.org/>.*



## The DGM and Its Project in Mexico

The Dedicated Grant Mechanism (DGM) was part of the Forest Investment Program (FIP) that provides funding to many countries to help address the underlying drivers of deforestation and forest degradation.

The DGM operates at the national level through a dozen tailor-made country projects, each of which consists of specific, community-led subprojects created to meet the unique needs and priorities of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs). Each country project involves IPLC representatives from the design stage to address local needs and promote inclusive governance while strengthening capacity to play an informed, active, and invaluable role in sustainable forest management.

The Mexico DGM has provided grants, technical assistance, strategic communication, and targeted training directly to Indigenous Peoples and women-led groups and businesses. It was implemented from 2017 to 2024 by Rainforest Alliance Mexico in the states of Campeche, Jalisco, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, and Yucatan, where deforestation has remained particularly high in tropical dry forests and rainforests.

In rural Mexico, lands can be managed under a range of rural land tenure regimes, which typically result in disadvantages

to women's economic inclusion and development. As a result, the subprojects were tailored to meet the needs of a wide range of community environments, and involve activities related to agroforestry; eco-tourism; sustainable forestry; agricultural production; and associated products, including coffee, cacao, vanilla, fruit, vegetables, plants, honey, furniture, arts and wood crafts, and sheep.

The Mexico DGM Project focused on enhancing the capacity of IPLCs to sustainably manage the forests they depend on. Some significant project activities include:

- Providing direct grants to women-led groups and IPLCs to start or expand forestry-related projects.
- Targeted technical assistance and provision of operational costs for conducting critical project management activities.
- Training women in organizational and management skills, empowering them to lead and manage community forestry organizations, thereby increasing their influence and presence in sectors traditionally dominated by men.
- Supporting women to develop technical skills in forestry practices, enabling them to participate more effectively in sustainable forest management efforts and improving their prospects for self-employment and income.
- Increasing women's access to existing financial markets and services, enabling their participation in forest-related productive activities and commercial forest products and services.

- Tailoring financial inclusion training materials to women's needs, helping them with financial management and accessing credit.
- Conducting regional workshops to develop proposals that prioritize women's participation by addressing the barriers they face due to traditional norms regarding productive and reproductive roles.
- Organizing workshops and knowledge exchanges among IPLCs, producer associations, and community enterprises, enhancing best practices and network strengthening.
- Providing training to local community leaders, supporting them to advocate for sustainable forest practices within their communities, reduce dependency on external assistance, and foster a sense of ownership, responsibility and leadership.
- Developing a culturally appropriate communication and advocacy strategy for project activities, highlighting women's contributions to forestry, and encouraging greater female participation in decision-making processes related to forest management and conservation efforts.

To further evaluate the Mexico DGM Project's impact on improving women's capacities and livelihoods, the World Bank task team, with support from the World Bank-led Global Partnership for Sustainable and Resilient Landscapes (PROGREEN) and the Climate Investment Funds (CIF) initiated an assessment of outcomes achieved by the project between 2017 and 2024 using the W+ Standard.



## The Uniqueness of the W+ Standard

The W+ Standard's methodology looks at six domains to measure and quantify women's empowerment in projects that include gender affirmative actions: time, income and assets, health, education and knowledge, food security, and leadership. Qualitative and quantitative indicators are established in each domain and used as a basis for determining impact. Women beneficiaries within the communities participate in the assessment and contribute to the selection of appropriate indicators related to the specific activities of their projects.

The W+ approach is innovative because it allows project teams to show, in a transparent and robust way, how investments and activities aimed at strengthening women's leadership lead to tangible changes in behavior or outcomes. Through its rigorous and robust methodology, it can quantify non-monetary benefits in terms of women's empowerment, allowing project evaluations to present clear and attributable results of gender-affirmative interventions.

In addition, applying the W+ Standard allows these social empowerment benefits to be valued and sold in international markets through a market-based mechanism known as W+ credits. This provides social and financial returns to impact investors and supports companies and investors to pre-finance women's venture projects.

This can help them fulfill their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments, while investors generate revenue by issuing and selling W+ credits. Once sold, a significant percentage of the revenue, as specified in the W+ approach, is required to be returned to the women who participated in the fieldwork.

The W+ approach can be applied across a range of sectors and generate additional direct benefits for women working in agri-food systems and environmental restoration activities. Ideally, it should be included in the initial design and applied from the outset



of a project, but it is flexible enough to be applied retrospectively, once a project has been underway for some time, to measure results of activities aimed at benefitting women in a variety of ways.

The number of W+ credits generated depends on the number of women receiving benefits, and the level of impact for each domain used. The impact is measured following a formula designed for each domain. The specific number of credits is then determined as follows: 1 W+ credit = 10 % improvement in one woman's life per domain for the period measured. For more details on methodology, see [www.wplus.org/domains](http://www.wplus.org/domains).

After the methodology has been applied and the data resulting from the assessment has been processed and finalized, an accredited firm must carry out an independent verification of the outcomes related to women's empowerment to finalize the generation of the W+ credits, following the W+ guidelines.

## APPLYING THE W+ METHODOLOGY TO MEASURE THE SUCCESS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE MEXICO DGM

In the Mexico Dedicated Grant Mechanism (DGM) Project, the W+ Standard was used to measure outcomes related to three domains relevant to the project: income and assets, education and knowledge, and leadership. The methodology included interviews as a tool for data collection, and each domain required an interview with very specific questions aimed at identifying not only women's participation in the activities, but also the real impact these have had in their lives, for each of the chosen domains. The surveys were tailored in advance to the specific context of the women who would participate.

In addition, questions following the "Do No Harm" principle were asked regarding any potential negative impacts experienced by participants, including any physical or emotional abuse, social sanctions, violence or marital problems, or increased community conflicts as a result of their participation in the project's income-generating activities or their new leadership roles.

To measure women's empowerment, the evaluation surveyed a representative sample of the 653 female beneficiaries, revealing that project activities led to an increase in income for women, with their average monthly

income rising from 2,681 pesos (US\$138) before the project to 4,079 pesos (US\$210) after its implementation, a 52 percent increase. This rise was a result of the aforementioned activities that allowed women to start or expand their forestry-related ideas and initiatives. This result generated 3,403 W+ credits.

Project actions also led to an increase in education and knowledge, resulting in a remarkable 121 percent increase in average knowledge scores. The W+ methodology uses a 'proxy index' that includes analysis of responses arising from multiple questions pertaining to knowledge enhancement, behavioral changes with the new knowledge, confidence in applying the new knowledge, and examples of how the project-gained knowledge has been applied.

Most of the women in the project said their ability to explain and implement improved practices—including new skills related to agroforestry, agriculture, beekeeping, and environmental care—as well as their ability to plan and manage projects, improved significantly. They appreciated new financial management skills and understanding how to fill out forms to access additional finance from other government and non-government initiatives. A total of 7,885 education and knowledge-related credits were generated.

The findings also revealed a 40 percent increase in leadership scores among participants, generating 2,623 W+ credits, also based on an analysis of multiple responses relating to leadership. After targeted trainings, women project participants reflected on improvements in key leadership aspects, including communication skills, public speaking, facilitation abilities, project design, and active involvement in community mobilization. For more information on how leadership outcomes are measured, see:

*A Crack in the Ceiling: Revealing Outcomes for Women's Leadership in Forest and Agricultural Landscape Initiatives*

In total, 13,911 W+ credits were generated for the Mexico DGM Project, from 2017 to its end date in 2024, clearly demonstrating the major social benefits generated by a project working in Mexico's forest landscapes with the support of climate funds.

An independent verification of the credits generated was carried out at the end of 2024. The verification

team used multiple methods, including interviews with project developers, implementers, and technical assistance providers. It also conducted face-to-face interviews with representatives of the women's groups participating in each state.

The value of these credits is dependent upon how much buyers are willing to pay. For example, in a similar agroforestry project in Brazil, they are valued at US\$25 per W+ credit from a private firm. If the Mexico DGM Project sells its verified W+ credits at US\$25 each, it would generate US\$349,775 that could be reinvested in women-led projects.

## Ensuring Impact

The role and actions of champions contributed significantly to outcome achievement at the community level and cannot be underestimated. Their contributions can be seen at several stages of the project cycle, particularly in the design and implementation phases.

Emerging lessons highlight the importance of establishing a dedicated budget for women throughout the design of the project, along with rigorous criteria for selecting the project team. In the implementation phase, the skills employed by various stakeholders and rights-holders are important in order to innovate and overcome institutional and personal challenges, which contribute significantly to the overall project outcomes.

Finally, future-oriented lessons include the need to establish mentoring networks for women leaders at the community level and to build partnerships with men to sustain existing outcomes beyond the life of the project. In addition, early technical assistance to those who have never participated is crucial, to empower beneficiaries that initially could not compete with more experienced beneficiaries.

### WHY IS THIS NEW EVIDENCE SO IMPORTANT, AND WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Many projects in forest and agricultural landscapes do not capture social outcomes. The W+ methodology allows these social benefits to be independently measured, accounted for, and verified. This helps project teams

to report more comprehensively on the critical project results that agencies and firms require to justify their investments and leads to increased funding for projects with environmental and social impacts. Additionally, the generation and potential sale of the W+ credits can create additional direct benefits for women working in agri-food systems and environmental protection, thereby making initial investments more sustainable in the long term.

The value of W+ credits in a completely new marketplace is a key question, just as it was a decade ago with carbon credits until that market developed and matured. And who will buy them? It is a chicken-and-egg situation. Without a broad supply of credits that rigorously demonstrates their social benefits, such as women's empowerment, it is challenging for the private sector or other potential buyers from the public sector to learn about these credits, let alone seek to purchase them. Accordingly, the application and verification of the W+ Standard in the context of the Dedicated Grant Mechanism (DGM) Project in Mexico provides solid evidence of the social benefits to environmentally focused projects at a critical juncture.

## FOLURization for Future Action

This brief seeks to provide valuable insights and foster discussion among project professionals about enhancing sustainability in projects, particularly in an era of limited government funding. It offers strategies that can make projects more appealing and viable for both public and private sector support. For instance, FOLUR country projects that include activities similar to the Mexico Dedicated Grant Mechanism (DGM) efforts could use the W+ Standard to measure, value, and reward women's groups that are implementing forest restoration, agroforestry, or other improved landscape management practices.

The global FOLUR platform aims to expand its impact by sharing knowledge beyond FOLUR, to reach projects that wish to embrace Integrated Landscape Management (ILM) strategies that are empowering. These include many World Bank-supported environmental and agricultural investments and GEF-funded initiatives.

Through this informative brief, we hope that other projects will learn about the importance of incorporating project activities explicitly aimed at addressing gender gaps and opportunities to develop sustainable food production value chains; promote land restoration

through ILM; halt land degradation and deforestation; and achieve low-carbon, climate-resilient targets. We now have the tools necessary for measuring and rewarding social outcomes such as women's empowerment through such efforts.

The FOLUR gender theme is grateful for the support of the Global Environment Facility.

## GET INVOLVED

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## The FOLUR Impact Program consists of:

*The Global Platform Project, led by the World Bank with*



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International  
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Global  
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GOOD  
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led by UNDP

*And 27 Country Projects shown on the map below, working with the following Implementing Agencies*



CONSERVATION  
INTERNATIONAL



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



Investing in rural people



UN  
DP



UN  
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