WOMEN FOR JUSTICE FOUNDATION



POLICY BRIEF

Trust Under Pressure

Climate Change, Social Cohesion and Women's Roles in Rural Egypt

Insights from storytelling workshops with agricultural researchers and practitioners

October 2026

Women for Justice Foundation

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Trust Under Pressure: Climate Change, Social Cohesion and Women's Roles in Rural Egypt

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All workshop participants and the organisations they described are anonymised.

The views expressed in this brief reflect participants' contributions and the authors' analysis, and do not necessarily reflect the positions of partner organisations.

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Executive summary

In rural Egypt, climate change is not only a technical or agricultural problem. It is eroding the trust that holds communities together: trust between farmers and the state, researchers and development projects, and trust among farmers themselves. Where that trust breaks down, communities hold together less well, adaptation policies stall, and disputes over water, land and inheritance can turn confrontational.

This brief draws on two storytelling workshops held in September 2026 with 27 agricultural researchers, practitioners and civil society actors. Their stories point to three findings:

1 **Climate change multiplies existing crises.**

Heat, salinity and water scarcity land on top of inflation, water shortages and internal migration, raising the stakes of every shared resource.

2 **A crisis of trust is the recurring pattern.**

Farmers hide their practices from researchers, tear up surveys they suspect are for tax purposes, and see projects that arrive with technology but no fair way to manage it.

3 **Women hold communities together, unrecognised.**

As men migrate, women carry a double burden on farms and at home, and they keep families and communities connected. Yet they are largely excluded from decisions over resources.

Women for Justice Foundation recommend action under four pillars:

- Women's participation: include women in decisions on agricultural resources, with real rather than symbolic empowerment.
- Social protection: secure the income and rights of women farm workers, and build social and environmental early warning for resource crises.
- Recognition of community roles: build community governance into every resource project, and recognise government researchers and local actors as bridges of trust.
- Funding: require context and peace analysis before projects are designed, co-design impact indicators with communities, and select implementers on competence and local knowledge.

SECTION 1

The Problem: Climate Change Multiplies Existing Crises

Agriculture remains central to Egypt's rural economy and livelihoods. It accounted for an estimated 18.7% of total employment in 2023 (World Bank, modelled ILO estimate). The Nile Delta, the country's agricultural heartland, is home to around a quarter of Egypt's population and roughly 30% of its labour force (UNDP).

This sector is under mounting climate pressure:

- **Water scarcity.** Egypt depends on the Nile for about 97% of its renewable water. Water availability stands at around 560 cubic metres per person per year, well below the 1,000 m^3 water-poverty line (American University in Cairo).
- **Sea-level rise and salinity.** Relative sea level in the Delta is rising by an estimated 3.2–6.6 mm per year, threatening low-lying farmland and pushing salt into soils and water (UNDP).
- **Falling yields.** Food crop yields are projected to decline by more than 10% by 2050 compared with a no-climate-change scenario, driven by heat, water stress and saline irrigation water (IFPRI, 2021).

These pressures do not arrive in isolation. Workshop participants stressed that climate change acts as a multiplier of problems that already exist: inflation (annual urban inflation reached a record 38% in September 2023, according to CAPMAS), water shortages and internal and irregular migration. Together, they raise the stakes of every shared resource and sharpen disputes.

This raises a central question: why do climate adaptation policies so often stall on the ground? This brief argues that a major part of the answer is a crisis of trust.

SECTION 2

Framework: Trust, Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding

We use social cohesion as our core concept, with peacebuilding and conflict as supporting concepts. In the Egyptian context, social cohesion offers a constructive, locally meaningful entry point: it allows communities and institutions to address tensions before they become conflicts.

Key concepts

Social cohesion

"the extent of trust in government and within society and the willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals" (UNDP, 2020). It has two dimensions: vertical trust, between government and society, and horizontal trust, among people across divisions.

Conflict

present when two or more individuals or groups pursue incompatible goals. Conflict can be waged violently or nonviolently, and "when channeled constructively into processes of resolution, conflict can be beneficial" (UN ESCWA, citing USIP).

Peacebuilding

a long-term process of "transformation toward more manageable, peaceful relationships", ranging from conflict prevention to recovery (UN ESCWA, citing USIP); an activity that aims "to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the cultural and structural conditions that generate deadly or destructive conflict" (cited in ICAN, 2020a).

Social protection

an integrated set of state measures that provide a minimum level of protection against economic, social and environmental risks, especially for vulnerable groups (Egypt Ministry of Social Solidarity). This differs from the She Builds Peace "protection" pillar, which concerns the safety of women peacebuilders themselves.

Figure 1 sets out how these concepts connect. Climate pressure strains livelihoods; strained livelihoods erode trust; eroded trust weakens cohesion and stalls adaptation; and weakened cohesion raises the risk of conflict. But communities also have protective forces that can break this chain.

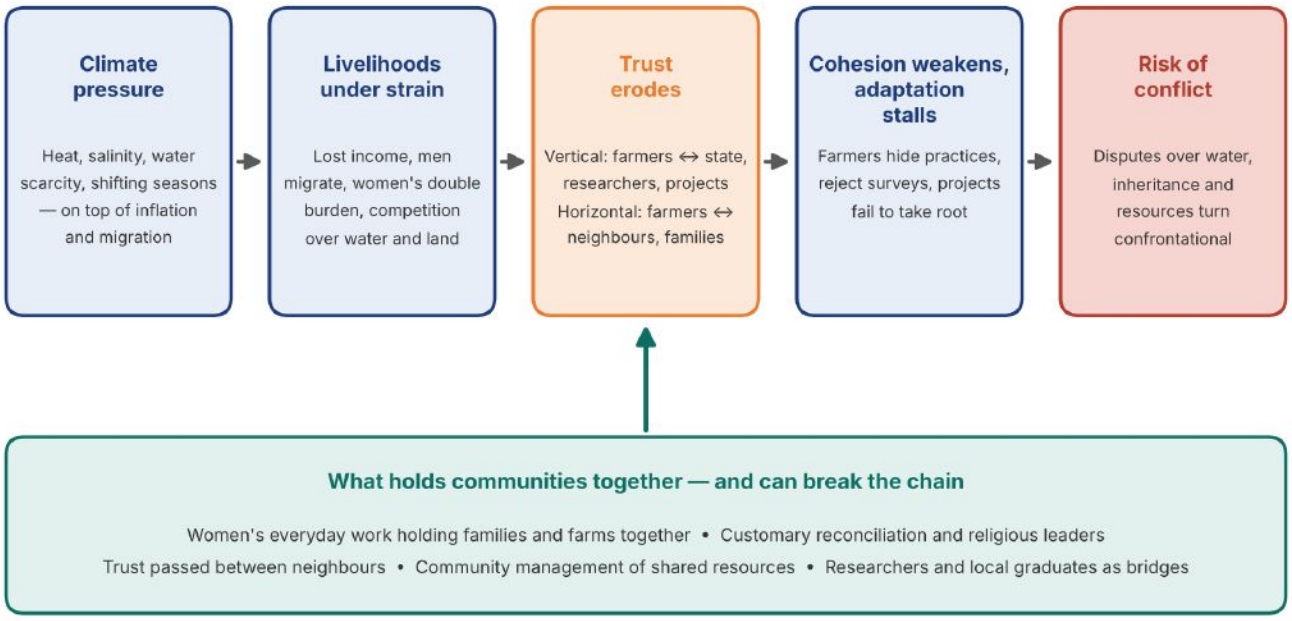


Figure 1. How climate pressure travels to the risk of conflict, and what can interrupt it. Source: authors, based on workshop findings.

SECTION 3

Methodology: Storytelling As a Research Tool

The brief is based on two storytelling workshops held on 15 and 17 September 2026 and co-organised with Climutopia. They brought together 27 participants: agricultural researchers (many at government research centres), academics, practitioners and civil society actors working with rural communities and national agricultural programmes. Many participants hold more than one of these roles.

Each workshop began with stories before analysis. Participants first shared concrete field experiences of drought, water scarcity or salinity leading to tension. Working groups then turned these experiences into structured observations on three questions: how resource crises distribute burdens between women and men; who takes part in decisions and who actually decides; and which unrecorded efforts keep communities together. Starting with stories led experts to speak about specific situations rather than generalities.

Government researchers were a deliberate focus. They are a bridge between the state and farmers, yet they are often overlooked in community-level activities, and many are keen to open spaces for influence beyond traditional government channels.

Limitations. The workshops gathered the accounts of experts and practitioners about the communities they work with, rather than the direct testimony of farmers. The sample is small and purposive. The findings are therefore illustrative of patterns, not statistically representative. In line with ICAN's guidance to credit women peacebuilders publicly only where it is safe to do so (ICAN, 2020c), all participants and the organisations they described are anonymised.

SECTION 4

Insights from the Field: Two Case Studies

4.1 Case Study 1: Project Design and Community Governance: When a Shared Resource Becomes a Source of Conflict — The Case of a Water Station

In one village, an internationally funded agricultural project built a solar-powered water pumping station to serve several landowners, in response to water scarcity and the rising cost of irrigation. The station was built on one farmer's land.

The shared resource quickly became a source of division. The owner of the land on which the station stood wanted to control the water and to collect money from the others, claiming it was for maintenance. Another group of farmers wanted to set up an association to manage the station. The dispute escalated into fights that came to blows.

The project went ahead as planned, but the rift in the village remained. As a researcher who worked on it summarised:

> *"There was a dispute between the people, and the project carried on — but it created a problem."*
>
> — Agricultural researcher

What the case reveals:

- **Climate multiplies tension.** Water scarcity made the station a valuable resource worth fighting over. Climate pressure did not create the dispute on its own, but it raised the stakes.
- **Horizontal trust broke down.** A new shared resource with no agreed rules turned neighbours into competitors. Collecting money "for maintenance" without transparency left each side suspicious of the other.
- **Vertical trust broke down.** The project delivered the infrastructure but not the governance, and moved on despite the dispute. Such experiences confirm farmers' belief that projects are designed to deliver their outputs, not to solve farmers' problems.
- **The community already had the solution.** Farmers themselves proposed an association to manage the station. Local knowledge of how to govern a shared resource existed, but was not built into the project design.

The water-station case illustrates a wider concern raised by workshop participants: delivering infrastructure or meeting project targets does not necessarily resolve the problems communities face. Without a proper understanding of local dynamics, meaningful community involvement and arrangements for managing resources fairly, projects risk reproducing the tensions they are intended to address.

Participants further pointed to a gap between donors' requirements and what happens on the ground. One described a funded waste-collection project that spent a year and a half moving household waste to the edge of the village, with no plan to treat it:

> *"These projects come in and create more problems than they solve."*
>
> — Workshop participant

Others described funded projects as "isolated islands, each working on something different", with spending decisions that depend on "the opinion and conviction of whoever runs the project". Where real context analysis is missing and implementers are chosen through connections rather than competence, failed experiences accumulate and the distance grows between communities and anyone who arrives with a project.

These experiences suggest that the problem extends beyond individual projects to the way interventions are designed, funded and implemented. When context analysis, coordination and community participation are overlooked, projects can fail to build the trust and local relationships needed for sustainable results.

This Case Raises a Key Question: Can Trust Be Rebuilt? Experiences from other projects offer some indications that it can. In an internationally funded fish-farming project in Kafr El-Sheikh, the contracted company had no relevant experience; the system broke down within a month and the fish died. A government researcher stepped in as an independent consultant and rebuilt the system, and, in the researcher's words, "there was trust between us". Yet the project still preferred not to contract with a government researcher or a civil society organisation directly. This example shared by one of the participants highlights the role that trusted local expertise can play in restoring confidence when projects fail. Researchers can be bridges of trust, but institutional arrangements often do not let them play that role.

4.2 Case Study 2: Trust on The Ground: Farmers, Institutions and Women's Roles

While the first case study shows how a project can deepen tensions when shared resources are not managed fairly, other accounts from the workshops point to the wider relationships that shape trust and adaptation in rural communities. These relationships operate at several levels: between farmers and institutions, among farmers themselves, and within households and communities. They can support the uptake of climate-adaptive practices, but they can also spread mistrust and risky decisions. The accounts also highlight a central tension: women and other local actors help sustain social cohesion, yet their contributions often remain unrecognised and their influence over decisions is limited.

4.2.1 Trust Between Farmers and Institutions (Government, Researchers)

Suspicion of anyone arriving from outside the community recurs across the stories. In Beheira, a researcher distributed a survey after explaining its purpose; one farmer took the form and tore it up, saying:

> *"You're here to count us for taxes."*
>
> — Farmer, as recounted by a researcher

Distrust is not always open. In the national wheat campaign, some farmers keep planting varieties that no longer suit the changing climate and hide this from researchers: "the farmer insists and plants it behind our backs, and won't admit he's planting it." On a coastal project, farmers who believed a research team had come to take their land met them with weapons; only once the purpose was explained did the researchers reach the fields, where they found real problems in the soil. Trust, one participant explained, rests on practical credibility:

> *"If a farmer asks you about a problem in his land and you give the right answer — the one he has already applied — he will trust you. If you say something wrong, that's it."*
>
> — Workshop participant

Even access to communities can depend on intermediaries. In Burullus, where many men have left through irregular migration, a broker controls researchers' access to women, who then "all say the same thing".

4.2.2 Trust Among Farmers: A Channel for Adaptation and Risk

Trust travels faster between neighbours than from official sources. In the national wheat campaign, farmers refused to plant on raised beds when researchers proposed it, then adopted the method after seeing good results on a neighbour's land. But the same channel can spread risk when knowledge is missing: "the year before, someone planted watermelon and made money, so everyone planted watermelon." Horizontal trust is a force that can either build adaptation or undermine it, depending on what passes through it.

4.2.3 Women: Sustaining Households and Social Cohesion Under Pressure

The relationships that sustain rural communities are also shaped by how climate and economic pressures affect households. Participants described a recurring pattern in which men and young people seek work elsewhere, through internal or irregular migration or multiple jobs, while women take on additional agricultural responsibilities alongside their domestic roles. This shift places further pressure on women's time and livelihoods.

On a research farm in the Delta, a participant described a workforce made up mostly of women employed as daily labourers, working from early morning, then moving to other harvests wherever the labour contractor sends them, before returning home to their roles as mothers and wives. Permanent government posts go mainly to men. For years the women waited to be appointed, and their pay was often late. They stayed silent at first; over time, they began to wait for the peak season and stop work to press the officials until they were paid. Women are not only carrying the burden; they organise to defend their rights.

> *"When climate change hits, the man runs off to look for other work. Women make sharbat out of fesikh [turn something bitter into something sweet]. If we empower women, they will build social cohesion, because they turn loss into gain."*
>
> — Workshop participant

This matches ICAN's analysis of women's everyday cohesion work, whose "credibility and influence are derived from the trust they have built across and within communities" (ICAN, 2020a). In rural Egypt, this trust-building is everyday work, done inside families, farms and neighbourhoods, and almost never recorded.

4.2.4 Barriers to Women's Participation and Recognition

- **Exclusion from decisions.** Women are rarely present where resource decisions are made, whether in formal or customary mechanisms.
- **Discriminatory norms.** A woman on a committee in a cantaloupe production programme saw a younger, less experienced male colleague leave because he refused to take instructions from a woman. Families still invest in sons over daughters: "I'll educate the boy, not the girl — her good will go to her husband." Women can also reproduce these norms: "Women are sometimes their own enemy: 'that's how we all were raised.'
- **Empowerment as publicity.** One working group was blunt: women's empowerment is often promotion rather than reality, financial support does not reach women, women carry double roles, and women are marginalised. They called for "real and realistic empowerment". ICAN makes the same critique of policy that speaks of "capacity" and "empowerment" instead of "recognizing the capacities and power that already exist, that women are already deploying" (ICAN, 2020a).

4.2.5 Recognising the Wider Network of Social Cohesion - Who Else Holds Communities Together?

Beyond women's contributions, participants also highlighted informal practices and local relationships that help resolve disputes, strengthen social cohesion, share knowledge and encourage collective responsibility. These included customary reconciliation sessions for difficult disputes, religious leaders urging people to put the common good before personal interests, young agricultural graduates advising fellow villagers on agricultural problems, and awareness activities involving rural women and school students.

These examples broaden the picture of how communities respond to pressure. Alongside formal institutions and externally funded projects, local actors and practices may provide trusted channels for resolving disagreements, exchanging information and addressing shared problems. Their roles are not necessarily formalised, funded or systematically recognised, but they can offer important starting points for interventions seeking to strengthen social cohesion. A peace analysis that recognises these forces, not only the sources of conflict, is the starting point for any intervention (ICAN, 2020b).

SECTION 5

What the Accounts Suggest

Across these examples, trust emerges as an important part of how rural communities respond to climate and economic pressures. Relationships with researchers and institutions can influence whether problems are disclosed and whether technical advice is accepted. Relationships between farmers can help spread adaptive practices, but may also encourage risky decisions. Within households and communities, women and other local actors perform work that helps people cope with uncertainty and sustain social ties, even when that work receives little recognition.

These accounts offer indications that effective climate adaptation depends not only on technical solutions, but also on credible relationships, locally grounded knowledge and recognition of the people who already help communities navigate change. For projects and policymakers, the challenge is therefore not simply to introduce new practices or resources, but to work with existing relationships, address barriers to participation and support the local capacities that can strengthen both adaptation and social cohesion.

SECTION 6

Recommendations

Recommendations are organised under four pillars. Each is labelled by source, so readers can see what came directly from communities and what is the authors' analysis: P made by workshop participants; S drawn by the authors from participants' stories; T from the WJF team's analysis, aligned with ICAN guidance.

Pillar	Recommendation	Main actors
Women's participation	• Include women farmers and workers in decisions on distributing agricultural resources and inputs S • Replace symbolic empowerment with "real and realistic empowerment", backed by a comprehensive vision with clear tracks P • Support gender research in the agricultural sector P	Ministry of Agriculture; agricultural cooperatives; research centres
Social protection and economic security	• Guarantee the rights and timely pay of women daily labourers, including on public farms S • Improve incomes: job opportunities for those affected by crises, small and micro projects for productive families, and skills training P • Build a resource-crisis strategy based on social and environmental early warning, and track those who exploit crises P	Government; Ministry of Social Solidarity; donors
Recognition of community roles	• Recognise government agricultural researchers as bridges, and open spaces for them to work with communities beyond traditional channels T • Build community governance, such as farmers' associations, into every project that creates a shared resource S • Recognise informal cohesion work (customary reconciliation, religious leaders, local graduates, women's networks) in peace and context analysis S • Build a relationship with communities and explain the purpose before collecting data S	Research centres; donors and INGOs; civil society
Funding	• Require context and peace analysis before projects are designed; co-design impact indicators with local partners and communities; select implementers on competence and local knowledge, not personal connections T • Support transparency research so resources reach those entitled to them P • Coordinate funded projects and align the visions of all stakeholders, rather than funding "isolated islands" P	Donors; INGOs; government

The funding recommendations reflect ICAN's operational guidance on funding women peacebuilders, which calls on donors to engage local partners from assessment and design through to evaluation, to avoid imposing donor-driven agendas, and to recognise that peacebuilding impact is best evident over time (ICAN, 2020b).

SECTION 7

Conclusion: Peacebuilding Starts in the Field

Climate change is testing the relationships that hold rural Egypt together. The stories in this brief show the same pattern again and again: scarce resources raise the stakes, projects without fair governance deepen suspicion, and farmers withdraw their trust from the very institutions meant to help them adapt. Rebuilding trust, between people and between communities and institutions, is a precondition for any climate adaptation policy to succeed. At its core, this is peacebuilding work.

The paper suggests that climate adaptation in rural Egypt should be understood not only as a technical and agricultural issue, but also as a matter of social cohesion and governance. Projects that fail to build trust, ensure fair resource management, and recognise women's roles risk deepening the very tensions they aim to address.

Women already sustain social cohesion through their everyday, often unrecognised work. Recognising, protecting and resourcing this contribution is essential to effective climate policy. Investing in social cohesion today is an investment in preventing future conflict.

Future direction. Seasonal women's labour in agriculture emerged as an issue of major practical and developmental importance that deserves dedicated research and advocacy.

Annex A. Workshop participants by stakeholder group

Stakeholder group	Number*
Universities, think tanks and researchers	23
NGOs and community-based organisations	5
Youth	4
National government	3
Corporations and business leaders	1
Total participants (unique individuals)	**27**

* Each participant is counted in every group they represent, so the figures add up to 36, while the actual number of participants was 27. Many participants hold more than one role; for example, a researcher may also work for a government body and be active in a civil society organisation.

Annex B. All recommendations made by workshop participants

For transparency, the recommendations recorded by the working groups are listed here in full, including those outside the focus of this brief.

- A comprehensive and clear vision, with real tracks and pathways
- Real and realistic empowerment of women
- Improving incomes
- Awareness-raising and education
- Supporting transparency research so resources reach those entitled to them
- Supporting gender research
- Providing job opportunities for those affected by real crises
- Small and micro projects to support productive families
- A resource-crisis management strategy based on social and environmental early-warning programmes
- Tracking those who exploit crises, to limit corruption
- Training programmes to give affected groups skills
- On informal building on farmland: protecting agricultural land for current and future generations; raising awareness of the importance of agriculture; enforcing existing legislation; implementing marketing and agricultural support policies; fair, fully serviced alternative housing in the desert; and aligning the visions of all stakeholders

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