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Understanding local difference: gender (plus) matters for NGOs

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Introduction

This article aims to promote a more consistent analysis of recognised local difference in the work we do as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), particularly, but not only, gender differences. We want to do two things.

- Illustrate why and how it is important to 'disaggregate' populations – to separate out different subgroups for analysis – going beyond 'the local' and 'the community' in our analysis. We use examples of selected publications from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).
- Provide a basic tool for thinking about difference in the work we do, focusing on the management of natural resources for sustainable development.

The article is based on a longer review of IIED publications, produced for internal learning. It is particularly relevant for intermediary rather than grassroots or membership organisations.

Why difference?

Poverty reduction is an overarching goal of most development organisations. IIED's mission statement links livelihoods with ecological resilience. It is:

... to shape a future that ends global poverty and ensures fair and sound management of the world's resources.

One key principle underlying the way we work is to

... support a greater voice for less powerful interests by building their capacity to act and speak, by linking local and global levels.¹

But does IIED's work and that of similar organisations incorporate an understanding of how 'less powerful interests' are differentiated?

It is now more widely acknowledged that economic reforms (structural adjustment policies) and market-led development have increased socio-economic inequalities, between countries and between groups within countries. As IIED's Natural Resources Group strategy puts it:

The importance of geography is being overtaken by social inequalities and large segments of the world's population are marginalised.

¹ From the IIED Strategy Document 2005-2008. See www.iied.org/aboutiied/strategydocument.html

“Gender is a key dimension of social difference, which affects people’s experience, concerns and capabilities in the management of natural resources.”

The trend is one of greater inequalities **within** rural and urban areas. Those with greater assets and power are much better able to participate in and harness the benefits of market-led development.² One example is the expansion of industrialised, commercial and often export-oriented agriculture and forestry. It tends to concentrate land and natural resources in the hands of a few, marginalising production for local and subsistence use. Market liberalisation tends to benefit larger farmers and widens inequalities between them and small, resource-poor farmers.

We argue that international and national NGOs could strengthen their approach and results with a greater understanding of the need for a differentiated policy, which takes into account local context and dynamics. Gender is a key dimension of social difference, which affects people’s experience, concerns and capabilities in the management of natural resources. While many NGOs already disaggregate fairly systematically on assets and income differences, a stronger focus on gender perspective, and an understanding of other differences such as race, caste and age would give us a firmer basis for understanding how policies affect different groups.

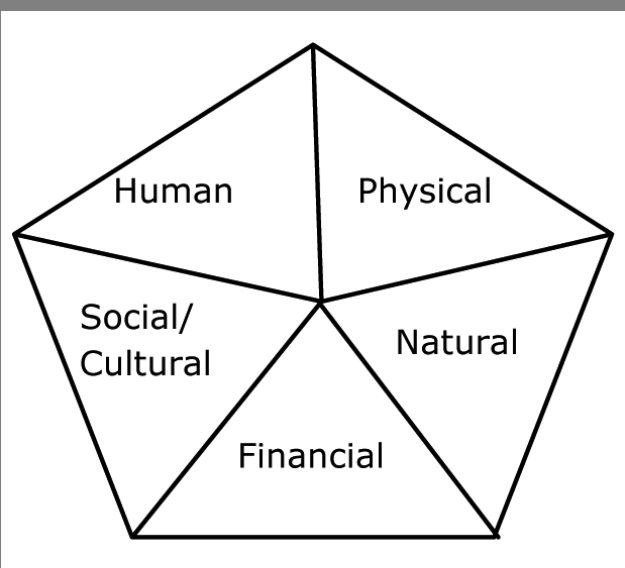
Gender and difference

Unequal gender relations and women’s lack of secure rights to land and natural resources tends to exclude them from decision-making over land and natural resource use in many parts of the world. However, women often bear the main responsibility for ‘putting food on the table’ and are heavily involved in the day-to-day management of natural resources.

If we examine the sustainable livelihoods framework, which is used by a number of agencies involved in development programmes, it is clear that there are differences in the level of assets, or what is sometimes termed capital, of different groups (see Box 1). In different contexts, caste, race and age may be very important. In almost all contexts, gender tends to be important.

Existing assets (material and social, e.g. networks and access to information) affect the power to access and influ-

Box 1: Assets in the livelihoods framework



ence policies, institutions and processes. Increasing scarcity and competition over natural resources leads to increased vulnerability for disadvantaged groups. Household level studies indicate that, in the current context, competition between **men and women** and between **generations** often leads to the edging out of women and young men from control over productive resources, so that ‘family property’ is effectively privatised by older men.³ While situations obviously vary, there is concern that women systematically lack access to land, credit, income, education and information relative to men, while bearing heavier roles as carers, in the context of HIV and AIDS and often declining health and welfare provision.

Women’s roles and activities tend to make them less active in markets than men. When they do participate, the way markets (financial, goods and labour markets) are structured often deny women equal access. Similarly there is differentiated access to state institutions and political parties. Much of what women do contributes to the unpaid ‘care’ economy (e.g. childcare, cooking meals) as opposed to the ‘commodity’ economy although they are interdependent.⁴ The care economy is under-valued and yet represents an essential underpinning of human and societal well-being.

² See for example: *World Development* 28: 7 (2000) and IIED *Gatekeeper* no. 100 ‘Global Restructuring, Agri-Food Systems and Livelihoods’ (2001) – www.iied.org/pubs/display.php?o=9166IIED

³ See e.g. the 2006 IIED Briefing paper ‘Innovation in Securing Land Rights in Africa: lessons from experience’ (www.iied.org/pubs/display.php?o=12531IIED) and more specifically the paper presented by Christian Lund ‘Securing Land Rights: some reflections on approaching the issue.’

⁴ For further explanation see Elson *et al.* (1997).

Box 2: Examples of differences in power and access to information

- Within low income/resource poor communities, women have less knowledge of land registration processes and rules. In Mozambique, women were unaware that their land had been registered by community 'representatives'.
- In Ghana, chiefs who are well informed and connected are able to sell off land without the knowledge or consent of their communities.
- In southern Niger, the restrictions that young women face on their mobility, also restricts their knowledge of basic political processes such as the right to vote.

The perspective of poor women, who constitute approximately half the population in most societies, provides a unique and powerful vantage point from which to examine environment and development strategies:

- Firstly, women constitute the majority of the economically and socially disadvantaged in most societies, with additional burdens imposed by gender-based hierarchies and the subordination of women.
- Secondly, women's work in the survival, ongoing reproduction and care of human beings and the environment is critical and yet continues to be undervalued.
- Thirdly, gender-based inequalities are used to undermine the wages and working conditions of an increasing pool of women's labour used in fuelling economic growth. Export-led industries (such as textiles, electronics and garments) are a case in point.

The scope of work of many NGOs may make disaggregation difficult at times, but we should, at a minimum, avoid romanticising or homogenising 'local communities' (see e.g. Whitehead and Tsikata, 2003). When NGOs work on natural resource management, we tend to define groups according to their use of particular natural resources and/or production systems.

- Do we need to look at how identities and power at the local level intersect with such systems and who benefits from them? These are the factors which actually determine access to – and benefits from – resources.
- Do we privilege formal policy processes and not give enough importance to the influence of customary systems and to everyday and informal struggles which can also influence outcomes?
- Are there times when local difference matters less and when whole communities are equally affected, or are effects always differentiated?
- Do we see women's rights as human rights – or is there an implicit hierarchy of rights (and oppression) which underpins our analysis?

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Review of IIED papers

In order to explore these complex questions, we examine two papers by IIED, which deal with agriculture and small farms. They were selected as they aim to represent the interests of small farmers and rural communities and both seek to feed into policy processes and provide recommendations. In our analysis we asked three questions:

- Does the analysis recognise difference in the population which is discussed in the paper? (Difference refers to a) access to and control over livelihood assets and b) social positioning and decision-making power);
- Do the conclusions and recommendations/policy implications build on a disaggregated analysis?
- What are the consequences? Does it matter, when and how?

Transformations in West African Agriculture and the Role of Family Farms

This paper by Camilla Toulmin and Bara Gueye (2003) was prepared as a scoping study for the Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat. It provided the basis for developing a longer-term programme to examine the transformations in West African agriculture and the challenges faced by small-holder production systems. The study was carried out as a desk review of relevant material and did not involve field work.

Does the analysis recognise difference in the population discussed in the paper?

In analysing transformation in agriculture and family farms, there is a clear disaggregation between farm households using the 'three rural worlds' typology:

- the first category is globally competitive and linked to agribusiness;
- the second is locally oriented with access to and control over land but facing declining terms of trade, which means they are able to exchange what they produce for less than before; and
- the third group has limited access to productive resources and has diversified livelihoods, including migration, for survival.

**Women
working in
rural Niger.**

Photo: Marie Monimart

The size and composition of households and how the availability of labour affects household productivity is also discussed. Case studies are cited describing the migration of younger men to earn cash outside family farming. There is much less emphasis on gender disaggregation. For example, household heads are assumed to be male. There is also an assumption that family farms have links with communities, which are based on solidarity and mutual help. This is contrasted with commercial agriculture where there is often no social connection between entrepreneur and local community. However, this picture of family farming is at variance with much of the empirical work on women's labour in agriculture, where there is often struggle over time, resources and benefits at the household level. Equally, there are often struggles e.g. over land and water within communities that operate family farms.

Do the conclusions and recommendations build on a disaggregated analysis?

The analysis then moves to the drivers of change and the challenges. Here, the pressure on family farms to use their cheap labour to adapt is not analysed in terms of the results of women's work burden (and effects on her own and the household's health and well-being), which has been a common finding in wider poverty analysis of farm households. In addition, research on the intensification of cash cropping has shown that food crops may suffer and that income received from cash crops **may** be controlled and used by men in ways that lead to a decline in household nutrition and welfare.⁵

In assessing the rise of producer organisations (e.g. cotton producers) there is little attention to the composition

⁵ See e.g. Dey (1980) and Wold (1997).

of the membership in terms of size of family farm, gender or age. The question arises about whose voices are being heard in policy forums, and whether these voices represent the interests of more marginal farmers, youth and women. Similarly, the paper recognises that women rarely have direct access to credit, inputs and extension, and that women provide huge inputs into agriculture. But the implications for a programme of work are not analysed. The detrimental effects of power relations at the global level are clearly signalled in the conclusions and suggestions for future work. However, there is less attention to or awareness of local power dynamics. For example, whether an organisation such as ROPPA (*Réseau des organisations paysannes et des producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest*) reflects marginalised farmers' views.⁶

What are the consequences? Does it matter, when and how? Since the objective is to set out a programme of work on family farming, more can be done to have a clearer and deeper understanding of the unit of analysis – family farms – which gives voice to the concerns of younger and older members, women and men. There are assumptions of harmonious households and communities, which are not empirically supported. Without such an analysis there is a risk of ignoring the interests of less powerful groups as described above.

It would also seem vital to include poverty and sustainability issues as well as the 'productivity' of family farming systems, which seems to be the main focus. This focus may be a response to the 'international' idea that family farms are inefficient. But we also need to make it clear that the costs and benefits of different kinds of family farms vary according to social positioning. It is also a chance to explore whether international development goals of equity, efficiency and sustainability sometimes compete and contain contradictions. The meaning of 'efficiency' also needs to be unpacked, as it can be at the risk of inequitable costs and benefits to different groups in the farming population.

***Prajateerpu*: A citizens jury/scenario workshop on food and farming futures for Andhra Pradesh, India**

This report was co-authored by Michel Pimbert and Tom Wakeford (2002). *Prajateerpu* was devised as a means of allowing those people most affected by the 'Vision 2020' for food and farming in Andhra Pradesh, India to shape a vision

“Women’s rights are critical if we are to achieve sustainable development. We cannot afford to view these struggles for rights as a luxury or of secondary importance in relation to other areas of contention.”

of their own (see also Kuruganti *et al*, this issue). A core group of Indian and UK-based co-inquirers began from an awareness that the views of small farmers, and those of other marginalised rural communities whose lives depend on agriculture, had been almost entirely excluded from decision-making during the development of Vision 2020. *Prajateerpu* sought to facilitate deliberative and inclusionary processes for policy analysis and review. The reports describe participatory action research that took place against a background of social, political and scientific controversy in which researchers were active participants. It used different methods in combination, including the citizens' jury, scenario workshop and public hearings. An IIED researcher was an active member of the action research process and the aim was to put expert knowledge under public scrutiny with the aim of democratising knowledge.

Does the analysis recognise difference in the population discussed in the paper?

The jury selection process did not seek to achieve representation from all social groups. Instead, it purposefully and positively discriminated in favour of the poor and marginalised farmers and landless. Emphasis was put on recruiting *dalit*, *adivasi* and women farmers. The selection criteria for jurors included:

- small or marginal farmers living near or below the poverty line;
- open-minded, with no close connection to NGOs or political parties; and
- likely to be articulate in discussions.

Jurors were chosen from a wide variety of agricultural backgrounds (different agro-ecological zones). They represented small and marginal farmers, food processors and an urban consumer. In addition, the diverse composition of witnesses, including government officials, agriculture experts and academics, ensured that a range of different groups in society fed their views into the process.

⁶ Network of Farmers' and Agricultural Producers' Organisations of West Africa.

Do the conclusions and recommendations build on a disaggregated analysis?

The conclusions and recommendations come from the jurors themselves and represent their views and interests. The emphasis in this initiative was placed on the process of deliberative and informed debate. It enabled groups who are discriminated against on the grounds of wealth, caste, ethnicity and gender to use their knowledge, interact with 'experts' and express their opinions.

What are the consequences? Does it matter, when and how? The methodology employed ensures that IIED and/or other intermediary organisations at the national level are not representing the views of marginalised groups. Rather, this project **directly** 'supports a greater voice for less powerful interests by building their capacity to act and speak, by linking local and global levels'. This is a part of IIED's strategy and principles. Such participatory methods build capacity for much more direct, rather than representative, democratic processes.

This methodology is challenging. Conflicts which occur between groups in such a process have to be managed. Even the process of selecting jurors may be contested – for example, those who do not feel it is important for women to participate directly. As with many methodologies based on 'stakeholder dialogue', much depends on the facilitation. If facilitators encourage such differences to be aired, then a more inclusive and real consensus may be reached than in forums where there are unacknowledged differences in power, or where some of the most marginalised groups are missing.

Lessons learnt

Intermediary NGOs, particularly those such as IIED working at international level, tend to have some distance from the grassroots. They work primarily with and through partners. This almost inevitably weakens staff understanding of specific contexts and dynamic processes of change and their outcomes. We have argued that a perspective which disaggregates is important and that we cannot see the local (or communities, farmers etc.) as homogenous. We need to avoid over-simplification and clearly acknowledge that differences in power operate at all levels. Gender analysis provides an important lens which interacts with class, ethnicity and age but also cuts across them. So for example, gender analysis can reveal the problems that young men face in accessing land and natural resources when these are scarce.

Women's rights are critical if we are to achieve sustainable development. We cannot afford to view these struggles

Jurors, two thirds of whom were women, present their vision during the Prajateerpu process.



Photo: Sarojini Naidu School

for rights as a luxury or of secondary importance in relation to other areas of contention. Rather, a gender perspective should be integrated into the analysis, in that inequalities of class, income, gender, race and ethnicity interact in particular contexts to determine outcomes. In some parts of the world, for example in South Asia, it is widely recognised that targets for poverty reduction will not be met without reducing gender inequalities. Having said this, we understand that these can be sensitive issues. But if we have good relationships with partners on the ground, we should be able to broach these issues. In any case there are usually many NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) already working on gender. We should be careful to include them in our choice of partner. Discussions on gender are easier for staff based in the North if we understand and are open about difference in our own societies and cultures.

One way we can deepen our understanding of local contexts is to spend time in the field, as opposed to meetings and workshops in national capitals. When this is difficult, we should engage in discussion with community-based organisations on their views about difference and inequality of different kinds. Respecting culture does not mean we cannot speak with partners about issues of equality and how they are interpreted by different groups in their and our societies. Avoiding such debate can even be seen as patronising. Respecting culture does not mean undermining hard-won universal declarations of human rights. For example, there is a real danger at the current time that cultural relativism is used to excuse breaches of women's basic human rights in extremist interpretations of Islam and Catholicism.⁷ Both men and women within these societies are contesting these views.

At a very minimum, if we are unable to be in the field regularly or take part in policy processes at the local level

⁷ The principle that each culture must be analysed on its own terms and the behaviour of others should not be judged by one's own culture.

Box 3: Some factors of differentiation

- Divisions of labour
- Access to and control over resources and services, e.g. land
- Participation in decision-making
- Distribution of benefits and incentives

ourselves, then we must refer to or build on other organisations' empirical work. What we must avoid is the 'add women' syndrome where the words are added without any analysis or substance. We are not arguing that each piece of writing done by NGO staff must reach the same depth of understanding of local context, difference and inequality – but that we can improve our outputs by acknowledging power inequalities at the local level much more systematically, taking a gender perspective in our work and viewing women's rights as human rights.

Basic tools for addressing difference in NGO work

Given the breadth of work at IIED and in many NGOs, it is difficult to provide a tool which is adequate for all the sectors, context and levels of our work. In general, a good starting point is to think about the key factors which lead to differentiation (Box 3). What follows are some simple guidelines related to different categories of NGO work.

Desk studies/secondary research

This kind of research is often carried out by staff, sometimes as a scoping exercise, to inform the development of further work. As this work lays the foundation it is important to have as nuanced a view as possible of context and factors of differentiation at the local level.

- Find out **which** differences are important and **why** (e.g. caste is a very important factor of differentiation in the Indian context. In the Sahel the important factor may be the type of production system, such as pastoralism, which defines stronger or weaker access to natural resources). It is also important to identify and use information gathered through participatory processes as these are likely to be less filtered and to represent better the interests of marginalised groups.
- Do a wider search for information on websites. A few useful ones are included at the end of this article.

Collaborative policy research with partners

International researchers work together with national partners on a specific project or research programme. This is where we can reflect better the processes that are happening on the ground and the kinds of action that will result in

more equitable and inclusive development, management of natural resources, and so on. We can also reflect which particular differences at local level have a bearing on the objectives we are trying to achieve.

- Discuss with partners which aspects of difference are important and why.
- Make sure this is reflected in the terms of reference, research questions and plan, and the methodology to be used.
- Wherever possible, participatory tools and approaches should be used to ensure that different groups within communities can voice their interests and frame the debate.

For example, in the IIED research programme on 'How land registration affects poor groups' the research questions included:

- What are the differences for men/women/incomers in terms of registering claims over land?
- Are women able to register their land as well as men, are incomers excluded?

In Ethiopia, the first phase of the research showed that women were particularly vulnerable to losing land rights, but that there was also some innovation in registration procedures which could protect their rights; so a piece of work was commissioned on women's land rights in Amhara which has since been used widely.

Commissioned research

International and national NGOs commission consultants or organisations. Often work of this kind is commissioned to improve knowledge of an issue for policy, or to provide specific information for a programme.

- Specify that local difference is addressed in the terms of reference.
- Ensure that the methods allow important differences to emerge, and specifically that participatory tools and approaches are used.

Work on producer organisations should include questions such as:

- What kinds of farmers are members of these producer organisations?
- How are these organisations governed?
- How are leaders chosen and how are different interests represented?

Convening actors to discuss specific issues and policies

IIED, and other international NGOs, facilitate processes of debate and information sharing at various levels, local, national and regional.

- Make sure that a range of interests are represented (including groups that may not be organised/vocal). A good example is the work on citizens' juries. This actively sought to support the voices of more marginalised groups within the context of a facilitated informed debate on a specific issue. In IIED's and other UK organisations' work to support pastoral civil society, on the other hand, currently no pastoral women's organisations are involved. We need to look for other organisations, or identify women within the organisations already involved with the project who could be supported to represent women's interests.
- Make sure that less powerful groups are supported to make their voices heard, e.g. organising time for women to meet and discuss their views to present to wider audiences.

Advice to donors (policy and programmes)

In arguments around major policy choices that will affect all poor groups (that is, the debate between promoting large commercial or smallholder agriculture or giving rights to indigenous groups as a whole) it may be necessary to simplify messages and forego a more nuanced view of the different interests at local level.

But as soon as you get into programmatic advice, the way in which you advise donors to support e.g. smallholder production, must take account of difference at the local level. Since all donors tend to have written policies and make statements which support inclusion, equity including gender equity, sustainability and human rights – it is a question of following through the implications of broad principles and policy statements for differentiated and context-specific policy and processes which may actually support these principles.

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