

STRENGTHENING THE LIVELIHOODS OF THE MOST VULNERABLE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Participatory research and gender in the face of Climate Change

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The paper addresses changes at the livelihood of rural people and the agricultural production they depend on as a consequence of climate change – with particular attention for the position of women. It reflects on the potential contribution of participatory research to harness and prepare the most vulnerable for future changes.

The paper starts from the consideration that most climatic change is still to come and that we should not consider ‘impact on’ agriculture and livelihood as if dealing with simple linear cause-effect relations; social change is an integrative element of climate change. To anticipate these changes, research and development interventions need to go beyond coping and not underestimate people’s own innovative and adaptive capacity. Research interventions should not only seek people’s participation for making better science, but also strengthen people’s innovative and adaptive capacity.

In parallel with the above, the paper argues for a more differentiated way of looking at rural people’s vulnerability, innovative and adaptive capacity. Communities are socially differentiated networks rather than homogenous groups. To identify the most vulnerable in these networks, the concept of intersectionality is presented. It used to understand how socially differentiated positions relate to access of resources and capacities, thus defining whether people are more or less vulnerable, have more or less capacity to adapt and how the social network influences. For the more vulnerable people, the cohesion in these networks has two sides: it can function as a safety net, but is also a local power constructs that can be exploited by the local elite and perpetuate the vulnerability of the marginal. We also conclude that women are too easily considered the most vulnerable: there is considerable differentiation among women and there are other groups that are highly vulnerable as well. On the basis of this consideration, in the rest of the paper we refer to the vulnerable, rather than to ‘women’ only.

The complexity of social differentiation is a black box for many researchers and development agents involved in participatory work. Studies show that differentiated interests, constraints (time-investment, risk of experimentation), and expectations (inputs, seeds, status) can mask arguments of local people to participate or not to participate. Researchers and development agents who use participatory approaches normally seek collaboration of authorities, thereby re-enforcing local power disparities. Inclusion of the poorest is easier said than done.

Taking into account these complexities, we propose that researchers and development agents should pay greater attention to communities as differentiated social networks. This attention will make projects more complex, as it asks us to combine the participatory research with social analysis. However, it should also better enable effective adaptive capacity building (of local leaders and development practitioners) and social cohesion strengthening in such a way that the most vulnerable benefit from interventions, while improving communities’ connectivity and safety nets such that all can be supported in the longer run. We do not provide solutions but observe that hit and run interventions and collaboration with well defined target groups in communities may not be the optimal way to reach the most vulnerable. “Business as usual is not an option” at first consideration would appear most readily for the practices of local people, but it is equally true for both scientific practice and development practice.

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