Future Agricultures

Policy Brief

Integrating Social Difference, Gender and Social Analysis into Agricultural Development

There is a widespread perception that ongoing social, economic, political, and environmental change processes in sub-Saharan Africa are leading to increasing levels of disadvantage based on social difference. This perception reflects the apparent inability of some groups to engage with new institutions for accessing and managing natural resources; new value chain governance models; and new regulatory measures affecting market access. In many rural locations it is women, along with young and poor men who are pinpointed as being increasingly disadvantaged.

While there is substantial agreement that women are relatively disadvantaged compared with men, this policy brief argues that problems of social disadvantage – whether associated with ethnicity, race, religion, social orientation, caste, descent, gender, age or disability – need to be analysed and addressed in the context of social relations in specific locations and situations. This argument is based on the understanding that rural populations are not simply collections of isolated, atomised individuals having only individual interests, as farmers, producers, traders etc, with no gender, age, class or other identities. It is also based on the accepted understanding that various forms of disadvantage need to be understood in terms of power relations.

This Brief focuses especially on the insights about gender relations arising from feminist and other research that supports calls for the adoption of a social relational analysis. It argues for a changed conceptualisation of gender in agricultural development, the need to be sensitive to differences within the categories of women and men, and to incorporate other forms of social difference.

The specific aim of this policy brief is to:

- encourage the incorporation of a social relational view of gender into agricultural development policies;
- present feminist and other research findings on gender relations that question the dominant framing of gender issues in sub-Saharan agriculture;
- highlight key operating principles for a social relations approach to incorporating gender

and other social differences into agriculture and rural development policy.

Framing Women as Poor, Vulnerable and Without Agency

A recent Future Agricultures paper calls for a shift in how gender is framed in agriculture development policy, practice and in agricultural research. In these domains gender is most often equated with women. In this framing rural women are constructed as uniformly poor and vulnerable (to domestic violence, climate change, HIV/AIDS, divorce or widowhood); without access to public services considered essential for their independent agricultural activities; and lacking agency and power to protect themselves and secure their limited claims over assets such as land. At the same time, women are presented as having various skills, social networks of support and information; strategies to avoid the potential negative impact of e.g. food taboos; and playing critical roles in household level food security, the well-being of children, the achievement of poverty reduction and environmental sustainability. This framing is underpinned by understandings of households and wider kin groups, local communities and local markets as sites of disadvantage for women, and by marriage as an institution within which women are uniformly subordinated to men and constrained in their independent economic activities. In contrast, men are presented as being in a position to act as independent agents to address their own different interests. The critical dimensions of household gender dynamics are presented as follows:

- Married women are vulnerable to loss of resource access when husbands die, or upon separation or divorce.
- Husbands will reduce their household contributions as the production and/or income of their wives increase.
- Husbands will take over the enterprises of women if they are commercially successful.
- Local and family norms limit women's ability to operate in the public sphere.

Other identified constraints on women's ability to engage with the changing economy include their purported concern with food crops and food security; their unwillingness to take risks; and their limited education, poor or irrelevant networks (to their economic activities) and mobility restrictions.

Policy advocates and development agencies, along with some feminist advocates have played a role in supporting these constructions that are now firmly embedded in agricultural policy as 'gender sensitive programmes and projects' and 'gender mainstreaming' that target women, or female-headed households as representing poor, disadvantaged and marginalised gender subjects. Substantial claims are made about the success of these women-targeted agricultural programmes in meeting women's practical needs as well as in improving household well-being; but also in enabling women to change their position and status in society and achieve gender equity. The call for working towards the achievement of gender equity is supported by theories that link equity with increased productivity.

Beyond targeting women for achieving social equity goals: Research insights

Considerable progress has been made in understanding gender relations since the 1970s when gender entered centre stage as a rural development concern (Box 1).

New insights firstly counter static comparisons between women and men and emphasise the need to focus on gender relations and their re-negotiation. Gender relations are not fixed in time and space and both men and women try to maintain and/or change their relative social, economic and political positions. Secondly they point to the fact that men and women are not homogeneous categories and

Box 1. Conceptual Understandings of Gender

- Gender relations are dynamic
- Women and men are diverse social groupings with multiple identities, e.g. as spouses, co-workers, parents, siblings and so on.
- Women and men as household members have both separate and joint interests while remaining engaged in what is essentially a cooperative enterprise.
- Social relations of different kinds (i.e. gender, class, age, marital status) often act together in the production and reproduction of disadvantage

this has implications for our understanding of the diversity of gender relations depending on the specific social context.

Given the pervasiveness of small-scale agricultural activities in SSA and the centrality of households or domestic units in both production and consumption, what happens inside households is critical to social, economic and especially agricultural policy. However, although households are understood to be composed of self-interested individuals, it is also now appreciated that individuals negotiate their interests within a general framework of cooperation in order to secure the survival of the household. Individual household members may hold separate purses in order to fulfil their individual obligations but there is frequently some resource pooling. Therefore, even though the ability to successfully negotiate individual interests will vary with age, gender and marital status, households are not automatically sites of conflict and inequity; and men, even husbands, may have little or nothing to gain by constraining the advancement of wives. Marriage is not a contract legitimising the exploitation of women. Indeed it may provide security for everyone as the principle means by which individuals access resources.

Although models of household decision-making continue to be debated, more important than deciding which characterisation is more realistic is the need to be clear that household forms are not set in stone. There are emergent and unfamiliar household forms and, actual behaviours at any one time or place may not conform to expectations and accepted rules. In addition, while it may be convenient for policy targeting to focus on households as though they are independent isolated units, in large part they are not so easily bounded. Rather they are linked with other households, kinship and other groups, and in rural areas may themselves include a number of relatives beyond an elementary unit of husband, wives and their offspring. These extra-household links expand the realm of 'gender relations' to include relations between siblings, parents and others. Members of kin groups provide support such as child care, finance for health and education, capital for investment and possibly even farm labour.

In a number of countries, even in areas of commercial agriculture where there is evidence of land markets, landholding systems remain tightly bound up with kinship institutions. Nevertheless, it is the household as the smallest decision-making unit that is at the vortex of changing tenure systems, and marriage remains the most important channel of access to land, as well as to the means to work it, especially for women. Women find it difficult to act on claims they may have over lineage land if they marry outside their local area.

In spite of the association of women with food crops and household food security both women and men work in various capacities, as independent operators (possibly as household heads or as household members working on their own

account), producing for consumption and/ or for sale; and as workers on the farms or in the enterprise of another (as labour remunerated in kind or cash for a spouse and/or others, or as 'unremunerated' labour). In the case of husbands and wives, their ability to call on the 'unremunerated' labour of one another is not open-ended. These exchanges also need to be placed within the wider set of exchanges that define marriage; exchanges occurring over time, possibly involving members of other households, and different items.

In spite of this nuancing of the 'women in African agriculture' narratives a number of studies suggest that as pressures on resources increase, many women find it harder to access the needed resources to maintain their enterprises. This is because they are not represented in positions of power, because their claims, like those of many disadvantaged groups, remain invisible in policy, and because negotiations for change may be dominated by powerful men and women for whom change is not necessarily advantageous.

Integrating social differentiation into agricultural development policy

The main challenge for those involved in policy development is to step outside of conventional understandings of change, and of accepted framings of the poor and of gender in which the majority of development actors are heavily invested. Policy must engage with the realities of social relations, link with ongoing efforts to change and identify situations that constrain disadvantaged groups.

Central to meeting this challenge is the revision of how to approach gender and social analysis more broadly. This means being critical of existing frameworks that in the case of gender say little or nothing about gender relations, about ongoing social change or the aspirations of the men or the women involved. They also have ideological underpinnings that may not correspond with local reality. The data assembled using the influential access and control framework (the Harvard Framework) has led to arguments suggesting that equivalence of resource control for women will unlock subordination. However, policies such as social inclusion via equal 'customary' allocation and inheritance rights, preferential credit facilities and more female extension workers may not have much impact on gendered patterns of land control for example, since women are not simply excluded subjects equivalent to poor men.

Given the limitations of a structured and formulaic process of social and gender analysis inherent in some gender frameworks, a useful starting point for integrating social differentiation into agricultural development policy is to agree on a number of 'operating principles' for a social relations approach to incorporating gender in particular but also other social differences into agriculture and rural development policy (Box 2)

These operational principles should lead to a different set of research and policy questions that reflect the specifics of particular locations, situations and disadvantaged groups. They also take into account the fact that rural people are active social agents. At one level therefore this is a call for a 'scaling down' of policy. At another level it is a call for policy to be more explicitly framed by an understanding of the wider social relations within which individuals take decisions, manoeuvre for change and seek support. This Brief argues that all this is necessary if the implications of social disadvantage for future agricultures in sub-Saharan Africa are to be taken seriously.

Box 2. Operating principles for incorporating a social relations approach into agricultural development policy

Vigorously resist notions that:
- the rural population is a collection of isolated, atomised individuals with only individual interests
- farmers, producers & others are neutral actors with no gender, age, class or other identities
- all rural areas are the same (share the same history & social identity, & are experiencing similar rates of change etc.)

Question dominant narratives about:
- women & men in agriculture, gender relations & household decision-making.

Remember that:
- gender disadvantage is about social structure
- gender relations are dynamic: men & women seek to maintain or re-negotiate these to meet their own interests
- men and women have multiple identities
- changes in gender relations are intrinsically ambiguous and cannot be simply read off from sex differentiated data

Avoid:
- simply cataloguing differences & seeking gap-filling solutions
- repeating standard representations of women & men, youth or other groups

Clarify
- the context in which any specific study is undertaken
- which women & which men are the subject of study
- gender and wider social relations in various institutional contexts

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