

Learning Together: Integrating Social and Gender Analysis into Natural Resource Management Research

Ronnie Vernooy



Women's loads are increasing all over Asia. Photo: Ronnie Vernooy

The complexity of societies in Asia and the problems of natural resource management are considerable. Notions of gender, class, caste, ethnicity, and age are integral to understanding the social relations and decision-making processes concerning access to and management of natural resources (e.g. Agarwal 2001, Farnworth and Jiggins 2003, Howard 2003). Understanding of social differences and social inequality are key to answer such questions as who participates in development (research) interventions and policies. (Cornwall 2003)

Most social and gender analysis in natural resource management is at the conceptual level. There are few effective learning programs that focus on systematic capacity building for gender and social analysis in applied research in this field. (Vernooy and Fabjer 2004: 210). Challenges to address include:

- Knowledge of and experience in social science research among natural resource management researchers is limited.
- Social science components are not well integrated with natural science in most research efforts.
- Researchers and research organisations have different starting points, interests, and expertise in terms of social and gender issues.
- 'Gender blindness' is common in research and research policymaking.
- Short-term training has limited impact.
- Resources in this field in Asia are not widely available.
- Networking has potential benefits but is not easy in practice.

The "Learning Studies" initiative

In 2002, a "Learning Studies" project started with the support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to deal with the challenges summarised above. The six cases selected, reflect a diversity of research strategies, approaches and methods.

All six teams carried out community-based (action) research highlighting different methods used and adapted in diverse contexts within Asia. They used a case study approach with six common guiding questions as a basis and a variety of action-oriented approaches, combined with a process of reflection workshops, peer review, and production of outputs. Two international workshops provided the inputs for the publication of a book (Vernooy 2006).

Sikkim/West Bengal, India

Through its focus on ginger production and commercialisation, the Sikkim/West Bengal study showed that social realities are often complex and sometimes contradictory. Gender dynamics interact with other variables such as ethnicity and caste. History is a major determinant of today's patterns. Cultural and ethnic identities and traditions (including taboos) inform the division of labour and mobility of women and men. The study argues that there is a high degree of socioeconomic differentiation among households. Among women, new differences are emerging based on age and cultural changes. Across social groups, women have limited decision-making power and limited access to credit, which has a negative impact on their capacity to improve production. It is men who are entitled to land. Most women have only limited control over cash income and household expenditures.

The poor have limited access to land and limited ability to expand production. In addition, the poor cannot afford to experiment as their access to land is constrained and have difficulties obtaining government support. In Sikkim, minorities coming from Nepal are often excluded from government support and research.

Nagaland, India

In Nagaland, an increasing demand for vegetables is a result of the rapid transformation of a subsistence economy to a market economy in combination with an urbanisation process accompanied by changing food consumption habits.

Women are primary collectors of forest products and marketers of vegetables, but women marketers are differentiated economically and according to social status. Women vendors face constraints and hardships, partly because the market chain is not fully developed (e.g. insufficient and inadequate transportation) and partly due to limited government capacities and poor service. Marketing is a complex political–social process, in which many of the women vendors have only recently become entangled. Despite their significant roles and contributions to the economy, Nagaland women are not fully recognised or respected as economic agents and citizens.

Nepal

In Nepal, women play important but undervalued roles in farming, including seed production. The technology development process in Nepal, as directed and supported by the government, is largely gender blind and biased toward the rich. Only recently, have some changes occurred in the recognition of the relevance of social and gender analysis. However, translating this into practical steps to implement social and gender aware policies and programs remains a major challenge. At best, gender is defined as 'women,' and 'women's' projects are seen as an adequate way to address gender issues. In research, those paying attention to gender are isolated and little integration takes place.

The field study showed that rural life is strongly shaped by social status and wealth hierarchies. Focusing on seeds, the poor and uneducated have restricted access to traditional and modern hybrid varieties, which is having a negative impact on their livelihoods.

Guangxi, China

Feminisation of Chinese agriculture is one of the most significant features of rural life today. At the same time, there is increasing disparity between the rich and poor. Ethnic minorities continue to be marginalised in many ways despite a number of supportive government policies. Their local knowledge and skills remain undervalued by society at large and by most researchers in particular. There is no system to recognise and value farmers' contribution to biodiversity conservation and crop improvement. The seed market, including that for local or locally improved varieties, is underdeveloped. Household food security remains unresolved and is becoming more problematic in the uplands and ethnic minority regions due to increasing globalisation and free-market expansion. Environmental problems are widespread and serious. In terms of social and gender considerations, the study argues that there is a lack of awareness, understanding, and planning by government, extension and research agencies, although some opportunities for change are opening up.

Hue, Viet Nam

Similar to the Chinese and Nepalese studies, the Viet Nam study argues that Vietnamese women contribute more to agriculture than men, but their work is not recognised by the government. Most government policies and programs are gender-blind, if not on paper certainly in practice. As a result, women and poor farmers have unequal access to education, services, and information (e.g., research results).



At the entrance of the market in Hue, Vietnam. Photo: Ronnie Vernooy

Many farmers (including women) say that men are better than women at learning about new farming technologies and practices. Local leaders and extension agents agree with this. They also think that men will disseminate knowledge automatically to women (one reason why they have no problem with only men attending training events). The study criticises these gender-biased views and the outcomes they lead to.

Viet Nam is undergoing dramatic macroeconomic change. However, economic growth does not necessarily translate into reduced poverty, greater equity, and environmental sustainability. On the contrary, gaps between cities and rural areas, between lowlands and uplands, and between the ethnic majority and ethnic minorities seem to be widening.

Mongolia

Mongolia is faced with serious degradation of natural resources, especially grasslands, making it increasingly difficult to maintain the traditional herding lifestyle. At the macro level, the country is undergoing rapid change (liberalisation, urbanisation, steps toward democratisation), but the history of Soviet domination, the still heavily top-down government style, limits imposed by nature, and traditional practices and beliefs influencing gender division of labour and women's mobility, constrain livelihood options and limit opportunities for change. Differences between the rich and the poor seem to be widening. Herder women play important roles in natural resource management, but are undervalued by government and herders alike. Decision-making is not shared equally and power imbalances exist between women and men. There is widespread disrespect and disregard of local knowledge and practices.

The team's efforts included field research activities, targeted training for herders, government staff, and researchers in participatory rural appraisal, social and gender analysis, participatory monitoring and evaluation, national and international networking, and direct involvement in national policymaking including the drafting of new laws. Two innovative action research activities are the formation of community herder groups and the establishment of pasture co-management teams involving herders, local government, and members of civil society.

Synthesis: insights from the field

All studies emphasise that natural resource management questions, whether addressed from a micro or macro perspective, are not social or gender neutral. A striking result of the comparative analysis is that social and gender inequities in decision-making, access and control of natural resources continue. In several cases, inequities seem to be deepening, reinforced by conservative cultural norms and political systems, and intensified by impacts of forces including globalisation, privatisation, and commoditisation. In a number of countries, these forces play out in the form of out-migration of men. This, in turn, is leading to the feminisation of agriculture, which is increasing burdens on many women. Women's changing roles in the marketing of crops and other natural resource products is another important common issue. Both negative tendencies: little or no respect, nor support for women vendors from municipal authorities, and positive tendencies exist: women collectively entering the seed market.

Although not explicitly addressed by all studies, another important issue concerns the continuing gender-blindness insensitiveness of policies and government services that affect natural resource management practices. This leads to arguing for the urgency of improving linkages of relevant research results to policy makers, and the need to prioritise this at the outset. "Social and gender analysis is essential, not optional, for the formulation of responsive and gender sensitive policies/regulations and related implementation and management to avoid further marginalisation and biases in the mainstreaming process." (Vernooy and Zhang 2006: 231)

Conclusion: learning from collaborative practice

New ways of doing field research through participatory action methods and tools, farmer-to-farmer or herder-to-herder, other participatory forms of extension (particularly in Viet Nam, China and Mongolia) and local development work stand out as achievements. All case studies contributed to increasing social science knowledge and experience among natural resource management researchers and research managers.

Our assessment suggests that the success of capacity building strategies for the integration of social and gender analysis can be enhanced by combining a “learning by doing” approach, participatory (action) research methodologies, a diverse group of participants, regular peer review, flexible networking, and strong personal and organisational commitment. Learning by doing focuses on internalising theories and concepts, understanding how these can be practically implemented in the field. Combined with iterative training and mentoring, this enables researchers to develop, adapt and adopt approaches and methods relevant to their social/cultural contexts.

There is value in rooting social and gender analysis in participatory methodologies – both in terms of an overall approach to research involving work with communities and the training methods used in the capacity-building programs with the participants. It needs to be strengthened in ongoing work.

Peer review fosters creativity and critical thinking among participants while also supporting researchers in recognising the potentials of research, highlighting challenges with constructive suggestions, and offering a platform for exchange of similar experiences and strategies.

Understanding the organisational contexts in which partners are working and the need to strengthen institutional support, emerged over time as a key lesson. A high level of commitment and desire to enhance learning towards integration of social and gender analysis is required among participants coming from natural science backgrounds and technical disciplines. This commitment also has to come from management of the organisations in which they are working. A good mechanism to support this is to support the development and implementation of curricula and through training of trainers.

References

- Agarwal, B. (2001) “Participatory exclusions, community forestry, and gender: an analysis for South Asia and a conceptual framework.” *World Development* 29(10): 1623-48.
- Connelly, P., T. Murray Li, M. MacDonald, J.L. Parpart (2000) “Feminism and development: theoretical perspectives.” In J.L. Parpart, M.P. Connelly, V.E. Barribeau (eds.) *Theoretical perspectives on gender and development*, pp. 51-159. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre.
- Cornwall, A. (2003) “Making a difference? Gender and participatory development.” IDS discussion paper 378. Sussex: Institute of Development Studies.
- Farnworth, C.R. and J. Jiggins (2003) *Participatory plant breeding and gender analysis*. PPB monograph no. 4. Cali: Participatory Research/Gender Analysis Program.

Howard, P. (ed.) (2003) *Women and plants: gender relations in biodiversity management and conservation*. London, UK: Zed Books.

Vernooy, R. (ed.) (2006) *Integrating social and gender analysis into natural resource management research: experiences from South and South-east Asia*. New Delhi: Sage; Ottawa: International Development Research Centre; Beijing: China Agricultural Press.

Vernooy, R. and L. Fajber (2004) "Making gender and social analysis work for natural resource management research: an umbrella program for building researcher capacity." In *InterAction's Commission on the Advancement of Women and International Institute of Rural Reconstruction Gender mainstreaming in action: successful innovations from Asia and the Pacific*, pp. 208-223. Washington: InterAction's Commission on the Advancement of Women and Silang, Cavite: International Institute of Rural Reconstruction.

Vernooy, R. and Zhang Linxiu (2006) "Social and gender analysis is essential, not optional: enhanced capacities and remaining challenges." In R. Vernooy (ed.) *Integrating social and gender analysis into natural resource management research: experiences from South and South-east Asia*, pp. 225-236. New Delhi: Sage; Ottawa: International Development Research Centre; Beijing: China Agricultural Press.

Ronnie Vernooy (rvernooy@idrc.ca) is a senior program specialist in Environment and Natural Resource Management at the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada.