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Social Networks as Means of Information Exchange and Risk- management — A Case Study from Northern Viet Nam

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Abstract

Poor and vulnerable households in Viet Nam and elsewhere have a fragile and very finely balanced livelihood system. Shocks and crises can destabilise the households for many years and severely affect the welfare and livelihood strategies of the household members. This can easily lead to an overexploitation of natural resources. In developing countries, public safety nets often are incomplete or non-existing. Financial and extension services are lacking and hence, rural households tend to be left behind the socio-economic development of a country. Therefore, they have to find their own ways of managing production and livelihood risks, using their natural, physical, human, social and financial assets. One risk-managing strategy is the formation, maintenance and use of social networks. These social networks can serve as informal risk-sharing arrangements, but also as sources of information for an improved agricultural production and marketing base.

In Northern Viet Nam, three households of two ethnic minorities were selected to investigate the relationships between network members as well as the use of their extended social networks (networks comprised between 12 and 32 households) in order to cope with a crisis. Information was obtained through the use of a semi-structured, gender-sensitive questionnaire as well as several Participatory Rural Appraisal tools. Quantitative network data were analysed using the software UCINET.

Kinship turned out to be the major factor for network formation but also the level of wealth is an influencing factor for the formation and size of networks. As self-interest is the main motivation for helping each other, mutuality is of utmost significance and when not guaranteed or anticipated, support is very limited. Obviously, the network capacities of poor people are much earlier reached than those of richer people. Therefore, social networks are able to provide basic support, but are insufficient to entirely buffer a crisis of a poor or vulnerable household. Here other safety mechanisms are needed. Nevertheless, as the social networks also serve to exchange information, e.g. on sustainable agricultural methods, marketing possibilities and likewise, they may contribute to reduce food insecurity.

Keywords: Viet Nam, social networks