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Make Natural Resources Last by Changing Women’s Access to Assets - Experiences from Northern Viet Nam

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Abstract

Poverty is not equally distributed among men and women as 70% of the poorest people in the world are women and children. This is also true for Viet Nam, where women have little control over their life, assets, and income. Moreover, their social positions are normally inferior to those of men. Poor people face many risks and have thus developed over time sophisticated livelihood strategies. They are often based on their asset and resource endowment. As natural resources are limited, they need to be utilised efficiently and sustainably.

In 2004, gender sensitive field research was conducted with approximately 80 rural men and women of different ethnic groups in two provinces of Northern Viet Nam. Qualitative research, which relied on Participatory Rural Appraisal tools investigated gender-specific roles and entitlements. This included labour division, power structures, possession of assets, decision-making processes and risk management strategies. The Sustainable Livelihood Approach of the Department for International Development, UK, served as an analytical framework to identify the available assets as well as assess internal and external factors that affect the socio-economic situation of the rural poor. Own findings were supplemented by observations from micro credit projects in the region, which encouraged women to participate in an agricultural training and to obtain credit.

It was found, that all assets, including natural resources, are considered to be owned by men, they also have the primary right to decide upon their use. Yet, the risk-management strategies hardly vary between women and men. In case of a crisis, it is the household as a whole which makes use of the available resources and the existing social network, not individual household members. Nevertheless, if the access of women to certain assets (e.g. knowledge and credit) is increased, their social position improves and thus leads to more involvement in the decision making process of the household. In the long run, the changed composition of assets has the potential to improve women’s capabilities to use the scarce natural resources. This leads to a higher efficiency in the household’s resource use and hence reduces its vulnerability.

Keywords: Gender, livelihood strategies, resources, Viet Nam