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When Nature Frowns: The Impacts of Floods on Livelihoods in Rural Cameroon

BALGAH ROLAND AZIBO¹, GERTRUD BUCHENRIEDER²

¹*Bamenda University of Science and Technology and Pan African Institute for Development in West Africa (PAID WA), Social Sciences, Cameroon*

²*Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg, Inst. of Agricultural and Nutrition Sciences, Halle (Saale); associated research fellow at IAMO, Germany*

Abstract

Natural disasters such as floods, famines and earthquakes have strong negative impacts on livelihoods especially for poorer households in developing countries, where risk markets and states are missing, dysfunctional or only function partially. While much of the existing literature has concentrated on economic impact assessment, a gap exists in understanding the impacts of shocks in a comprehensive manner, and their combined effects on livelihoods. This article assesses the impacts of the September 2012 floods households rural Cameroon, adopting a comprehensive asset portfolio approach based on the sustainable livelihoods framework. A standardised questionnaire was used to collect data from victimized and a matching sample of non-victimized matching households, using recall method, allowing for a before – after comparison in order to disentangle the specific impacts of the floods. An analysis of the role of formal and informal risk management strategies amongst victims in the research area after the floods is also undertaken. The results reveal that victims were essentially not different from non-victims before the floods, suggesting that this shock was not selectively biased towards the poor as assumed in the theoretical literature. However, the floods had serious impacts on the asset portfolios of victims, as indicated by significant losses in livestock, household assets and limited food security. Social impacts included low recovery rates and reluctance to relocate to safer areas. The article concludes with the need for comprehensive approaches to better apprehend the impacts of floods on victims. The need for combining formal (government) and informal instruments in dealing with flood impacts in rural areas in developing countries is discussed.

Keywords: Floods, impacts, livelihoods, rural Cameroon