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Power Relations and Cooperation in Polygynous Households in Rural Burkina Faso

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Abstract

How best can interventions be implemented to ensure intrahousehold cooperation for improved productivity and food security? Actors within the gender and rural development space continue to grapple with this question in an attempt to ensure that their interventions do not deepen inequalities but foster cooperation that yields optimal and equitable benefits for all household members. While literature has focused on the outcomes and processes of intrahousehold cooperation, insights into why and under which conditions household members cooperate are rare, especially for polygamous households for which the prevailing orthodoxy is that such households are conflict-ridden. To explain why cooperation occurs in some households, and not in others, this paper examines the intrahousehold power dynamics, the nature of the collective dilemmas, and the institutional arrangements that shape intrahousehold interactions. The Institutional Analysis and Development framework was applied as an analytical tool to study collective action among the Fulani and the Mossi polygynous farming households in Burkina Faso. Data were collected through ethnographic instruments, including participant observation, supplemented with focus group discussions, net-map exercises, and in-depth interviews. The study found that intrahousehold cooperation is contingent upon the nature of the problems to resolve, the transaction costs, and trade-offs involved in performing joint endeavours. The results demonstrated that norms and rules, through rewards and sanctions, have the power to articulate intrahousehold collective action. Furthermore, the relations of production, subsumed in the conjugal and inter-generational contracts, define the rights and obligations of each household member, with implications for cooperation and division of labour. Projects that aim at enhancing productivity and ensuring the adoption of improved technologies should be wary of the intrahousehold dynamics and their potential effects on the likelihood of households embracing innovative tools for increased productivity and food security. The results also point to the importance of equity concerns in tailoring policy interventions in rural areas.

Keywords: Cooperation, Fulani, IAD, institutional arrangements, intrahousehold, Mossi, polygyny