Supporting gender-inclusive dialogue over natural resource management

Summary

Rural households who fail to gain a voice in decisions over the management of shared forests, pasturelands, wetlands and fisheries face heightened risks to their livelihoods, particularly as competition increases between existing and new user groups. Exclusion from decision-making increases vulnerability of rural households, making it more difficult for them to move out of poverty and thwarting broader efforts to achieve sustainable resource management. Poor rural women in particular often face institutionalized barriers to effective participation in resource management. Structured efforts to create inclusive dialogue can help address those barriers, contributing to more equitable resource management and more resilient livelihoods.

The problem

Inequalities embedded in community resource management institutions — the rules of membership, benefit sharing and access — determine when women's voices are heard and when they are ignored. For instance, despite their reliance on natural resources such as fisheries and land for subsistence, women often have less access to and control over these resources than their male counterparts. In addition, women and men usually have distinctly different roles in resource management, which often means that their needs and interests are also different. When this is the case, men's needs and interests are often prioritized over women's. In many developing countries, gender inequities in resource management are also reflected in markets, communities, families and the state.

Many projects addressing natural resource management and community development aim to use participatory approaches. Yet organizers of participatory approaches often fail to recognize and address the complexity of power relations within communities and among stakeholders at different scales. Even in projects that espouse gender equity goals, gender-balanced participation is often seen as a sufficient aim in itself. Organizers frequently assume that if women are present during community consultations, their concerns will automatically be integrated into existing decision-making processes. However, pre-existing gender inequalities and gendered social norms can prevent women from joining decision-making fora or restrict their effective participation when they join. As a result, women's priorities may still go unaddressed.

The sources of inequity also interact to reinforce each other. In lakeshore communities in Uganda and Zambia, for example, women remain largely excluded from higher-income earning activities in the fishing industry. Boat owners are the most influential participants in local resource management bodies; since women seldom own boats, they are often excluded from these groups or ineffective in achieving their goals within them. Despite quotas for female membership in management institutions in Uganda, inequities in resource endowments and assets frequently reduce the confidence of female

Women leaders in Kachanga village, Uganda, made the issue of sanitation and public health a top priority for collective action

participants and hinder their effective participation. Such economic disadvantages are often compounded by women's restricted access to education, creating further obstacles to their influence in decision-making processes.

Women's voices and responsive decision-making

Multistakeholder dialogue can create a platform for poor women to voice their priorities and better influence collective decisions. Gender-inclusive dialogue gives equal value to women's and men's experiences by recognizing the differential needs, preferences and constraints of each, and by analyzing gender relations within social, political and economic structures. Ensuring that women have a seat at the table is only a partial solution. Obstacles to gender-inclusive participation must also be identified and context-specific strategies developed.

In Uganda, the Strengthening Aquatic Resources Governance project supported a series of dialogue workshops with fishing communities using a multistakeholder process called Collaborating for Resilience. Despite the policy mandating that a minimum of 30 percent of beach management unit members be women, it was difficult at first to get sufficient numbers of women to attend. In addition to the cultural expectation inhibiting women's active participation, there were practical barriers to address, such as arranging child care at the site. And at the start of the workshops, women and boat crewmembers rarely spoke or suggested actions unless they were specifically asked. When asked questions in plenary, their responses were short and their body language was inhibited. By contrast, male boat owners were very outspoken. Women were also in the minority of those nominated by the Department of Fisheries staff and local leaders to participate in capacity-building actions.

Having observed the gender dynamics in the workshop setting, the facilitation team requested to speak to more women and held smaller, gender-segregated groups that met in less formal contexts where the more reserved participants could express their concerns. These concerns were subsequently validated in the full dialogue, shifting the focus of planning toward women's priorities that had gone unaddressed — in this case, community sanitation and health. Boat owners and other more privileged members expressed initial discomfort at the mention of sanitation by women in plenary, but in subsequent meetings they accepted the women's input on the topic and discussed the subject freely.

The community has mobilized, not only reducing the incidence of sanitation-related disease, but also building the legitimacy, confidence and connections of local leaders — both men and women — to address other shared challenges, including water pollution and fisheries management. Gender-inclusive dialogue functioned as a continuum: First the issues prioritized by women were included, then the women were able to give voice to their own perspectives in the larger group, and eventually the women gained recognition and respect from others in the group. Government officials at different levels, development agencies and other communities have taken notice, looking for ways to replicate the process of inclusive dialogue that laid a foundation for collective action.

Local women leaders in discussion with the local fisheries officer in Kachanga village, Masaka District, Uganda

Recommendations

Ensuring that typically excluded groups are actively included in decision-making over natural resource management requires efforts to understand the barriers to inclusion and address these through participatory processes. It also requires longer-term efforts to transform underlying inequities. Key actions include the following:

1. **Conduct collaborative analysis to understand how gender hierarchies, norms and values operate to restrict women's participation.** Gendered perception of women's knowledge and ability to contribute to sustainable resource management can inhibit female participants in mixed-group settings, as both men and women may tend to downplay women's opinions and interests and question the value of their contribution to meetings. In organizing dialogue processes, facilitators can pay attention to power hierarchies and specifically support participants who are hesitant to speak up. At the same time, facilitators can encourage powerful actors to recognize and respect others' contributions using tools such as communication agreements. Tools can also be used to explore power dynamics collectively; for example, the "opening windows" exercise has groups assess separately and then discuss what they see as areas of open information flow, hidden agendas, blind spots and unknowns. Such tools can help analyze power imbalances as a first step to improving communication patterns among community members, private sector actors and local authorities.

2. **Identify common goals for investment decision-making while acknowledging distinct interests of different groups.** An inclusive, equitable discussion early in a development initiative can help steer investment decisions toward taking into account the specific needs of women and men. It is important to find one or more common goals that all participants recognize as relevant. Facilitators can support participants to negotiate and identify actions that bring gains for the whole community. Where conflicts are already pronounced, a third-party mediator ensuring a fair process can — among other measures — increase the confidence of participating stakeholders amid persistent power differences.

3. **Create safe spaces for discussion within tradition.** Inclusive dialogue aims to trigger changes that lead to longer-term transformations, including women having equal voice to influence development decisions within mixed groups. This requires changes to the underlying inhibitors, such as deficits in women's self-confidence and sense of entitlement; it also requires men's support for gender equity. Change shouldn't be imposed or pushed so quickly that it causes harm or backlash, however, and gradual progress may mean accommodating norms and traditions at first. Keeping context-specific gender norms in mind can help identify strategies that achieve equity in dialogue and action planning without exposing women to the risk of repercussions outside the dialogue process. To avoid this scenario, a process may need to gradually engage women and men separately to probe issues that they might otherwise be reluctant to express in a mixed group. It may also require identifying trusted intermediaries charged by a group with bringing their concerns forward. In the example from Lake Victoria cited above, a women-only focus group asked a female health extension worker to describe the dismal state of sanitation as a key problem for their community. Sanitation was later ranked by the full group as a top priority.

4. **Equip women to participate effectively.** Women who have been previously marginalized and then enter management institutions need both skills — such as training in public speaking — and endowments — such as education — to participate effectively in collective decision-making. Extending access to credit, education and employment are long-term ways to build women's endowments. In West Bengal, India, the International Land Coalition has documented how women's lack of information and confidence prevented them from accessing laws and policies regarding land rights. The project used art to raise awareness of women's land rights, along with functional literacy training and actions to sensitize men to women's needs. This approach changed women's capacities and men's attitudes, helping build support for an initiative focused on expanding women's land rights.

5. **Work together with both women and men to raise awareness and promote gender equity in decision-making.** The sources of gender inequity concern relations between women and men, so efforts to transform inequitable gender relations require working with both groups. Focusing just on women can provoke strong resentment from men and worsen gender attitudes and relations, jeopardizing the gains of a broader development initiative. Therefore, it's important to find individual agents of change: people in government, civil society and the private sector — male as well as female — who are prepared to advocate for women's voices and concerns and serve as role models. This can help shift institutional priorities that may lead to more lasting institutional change, including more equitable natural resource governance. In the Lake Victoria case, the most confident women representatives were identified and supported as local champions, and their support for the collective action priorities attracted the participation of other community members.

6. **Design programs to contribute to transformative outcomes.** Gender-transformative change in its fullest form requires changes in the mindsets, attitudes, values and practices of program designers, as well as skills and tools to implement gender-inclusive processes. Changing underlying behaviors, norms and structures is complex and takes time, and may require changes in policy, law and institutional capacities on the part of the state. It also requires linking multiple actors across scales and addressing power relations. Pursuing equity in natural resource management decision-making will not in itself resolve these broader challenges. Nevertheless, inclusive dialogue focused on natural resources and livelihoods can help identify sources of conflict and address these in ways that improve people's livelihood resilience. It can also build experience in processes of social and institutional transformation that can be applied in other domains.

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