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Changing livelihoods, gender roles and gender hierarchies: The impact of climate, regulatory and socio-economic changes on women and men in a Co Tu community in Vietnam

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SYNOPSIS

This paper examines the combined impacts of climate, regulatory and socio-economic changes on gender relations in an ethnic minority community in Central Vietnam. Climate and regulatory changes have caused food insecurity because farming production has significantly declined and hunting and exploiting forest resources have been strictly controlled, affecting livelihood activities. Along with food insecurity, pressures created by social changes and men's reduced contribution to livelihood activities have forced women to adapt and move toward the cash economy, increasing their workload and responsibilities. Although there are positive changes in terms of women's status and greater economic role, these changes may also bring about tensions regarding gender roles and conflict within the family during this transitional phase. In conclusion, some policy recommendations are offered toward more gender-equal responses to the new challenges facing both women and men in a rapidly changing environment.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, much has been written about gender-differentiated impacts of climate change, such as the impacts climate change may have on women's income-generating activities and how women's and men's roles and positions in their families and communities may also be affected as a consequence (Dankelman & Jansen, 2010). Many of these studies have argued that because women have less access to paid employment in low-income countries, they are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts (Dankelman, 2010; Skinner, 2011). One concern is that many studies of climate change and gender end up focusing on women or men alone or as individuals, thus deemphasizing the ways in which climate change may act to either challenge or reinforce gender hierarchies. This attention to individuals may explain to some extent why gender-related studies of climate change have focused on women's vulnerabilities, hiding, as Arora-Jonsson argues, unequal processes of decision-making that contribute to this vulnerability (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Moreover, recent studies using an intersectionality approach also suggest that gender dynamics are complicated and are influenced by age, ethnicity, class and other factors (e.g., Carr & Thompson, 2013; Tschakert, 2014).

Similarly, we find that the impacts of climate change cannot be considered in isolation and need to be put in the context of other important changes that are taking place. This has been true as well in the case of Vietnam, where women's and men's roles and voices that link directly to gender relations and hierarchies have been affected not only by physical changes in their living environment, but also by institutional and social changes (Chaudhry & Ruysschaert, 2007; World Bank, 2010).

This paper is based on a detailed study that focuses on the combined impact of three factors – climate change, regulatory policies and socio-economic transformations – on the Co Tu ethnic group[1] living in a mountainous area of Cady Commune in Nam Giang District of Quang Nam Province in Central

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Vietnam. The commune is about 60 km from the centre of Quang Nam Province and about 10 km from the nearest town. Traditionally, the livelihoods of the Co Tu in Cady Commune were based on forest resources, including the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and cutting trees for houses, together with hunting, small-scale animal raising and upland agriculture. This was previously considered to be a remote and isolated part of Vietnam, but change has come in part with the construction in 2005 of the 14B highway going through the commune, connecting it with other parts of the country. This study aims to examine the combined impacts of these changing factors on livelihoods, and specifically on food security, together with potential impacts on gender relations due to the reordering of the gender division of labour. It will also explore whether this process presents new opportunities for Co Tu men and women and/or new tensions and conflicts, as rapid change takes place.

The paper is structured as follows: after a review of the methodology used in this research, the impact of climate, regulatory and socio-economic changes on the community will be examined. This will be followed by an analysis of continuity and change in gender relations and of women's and men's livelihood responses, and conclude with a discussion of some of the possibilities and serious challenges created by new pressures and rapid changes in this previously isolated community.

Methodology

The present study has employed four data collection methods:

(i) key informant interviews (KIIs), with government and Women's Union[2] officials as well as representatives of eight villages in Cady Commune;
(ii) focus group discussions (FGDs), consisting of two groups with six female respondents, two groups with six male respondents, and two mixed groups with four men and four women (all of working age);
(iii) in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 32 female and 32 male villagers in eight villages; and
(iv) a household survey conducted with 300 households in eight villages.

In order to gain an overview of the study area, KIIs were conducted at the start of the fieldwork. FGDs were conducted as a second step toward further understanding the impact of climate change and other factors on livelihoods as well as changes in the gender division of labour. IDIs were conducted after FGDs in order to understand with greater clarity, and on a more personal level, the gender-related issues that came up in FGDs. Finally, a household survey was used to check the range and level of change in a wider population. Given the long distance from one household to another, convenience sampling was applied in selecting respondents for both survey and qualitative data collection.

Age was one criterion for the selection of respondents. A majority of respondents (75%) that were selected for IDIs and the survey were middle-aged (30–60 years old) or elders (over 60 years) so that they were old enough to have experienced changes over the last few decades. However, in order to compare with other age groups, 25% of respondents were younger, in their twenties. Target respondents include both the Kinh (ethnic majority) and the Co Tu, with the latter comprising 80% of total respondents, in order to compare responses made by the two groups in the community. Other secondary data, collected from available studies, were used to support primary data.

The impact of climate change

A number of studies in recent years have examined the impact of climate change in the Red River Delta and the Mekong River Delta areas in Vietnam (Adger, Kelly, & Ninh, 2001; Few & Tran, 2010; Oxfam & UN Vietnam, 2009; Trung, 2013). However, in contrast to the research carried out in coastal areas, climate effects in the central mountainous region of the country – such as flash floods, drought, and landslides – have not been examined to the same extent (ISPONRE, 2009). Moreover, relatively little is known about the impacts of climate change on ethnic minority groups whose habitats are largely in remote and mountainous areas, despite the fact that they are identified as among the communities most vulnerable to climate change (ISPONRE, 2009).

The importance of climate change in technical terms has been widely recognized in Vietnam. The assessment report on climate change (ISPONRE, 2009) shows that in recent years, temperatures in Vietnam have increased by 0.05–0.20 °C and the sea level has increased by 2–4 cm per decade over the last 50 years. According to projections of the Vietnam assessment report on climate change (ISPONRE, 2009), by the end of the 21st century – under low and high emission scenarios, respectively – the annual temperature in Vietnam is expected to increase by between 1.1–1.9 °C and 2.1–3.6 °C, rainfall is likely to increase between 1.0–5.2% and 1.8–10.1%, and the sea level is expected to rise between 65 and 100 cm (MoNRE, 2012).

In this study, most respondents reported that the weather has been changing dramatically over the last twenty to thirty years. Major changes that the majority of respondents could identify include hotter summers, an increase in the number of days without rain – i.e., longer dry spells or periods of consecutive dry days (Adger et al., 2007) – and unpredictable weather and changes in seasons. Elders clearly recall a different pattern in their childhood:

> *Over the last few years, the weather has become more severe than ever. It can be tremendously hot. Hot and dry weather can last for over a month, even two months without any rain. This rarely happened when we were young. Rice and other crops have all died because of the lack of rain. The unusually hot weather prevents rice from growing as well. (76-year-old man).*

Climate change is one of the factors most frequently mentioned as a direct cause of decreased food security. In fact, more than 90% of respondents mentioned 'changing weather' as a reason for reductions in rice yields. The following quote is one such example:

> *[…] the weather has become more extreme than before. When it's hot, it's really hot. When it's cold, it's very cold. Rains become heavier even though the rainy season is shorter than before. This causes flash floods as well as dry spells. The seasons*