

Seminar Reporting - “Why Women Matter in Agriculture” Seminar

April 5th, 2011, 12:00-16:30

Sida HQ, Stockholm

On Tuesday, April 5th, 2011 SIANI had the pleasure of coordinating the opening seminar to a four day writeshop on “Why Women Matter in Agriculture: Overcoming Gender Barriers to Agricultural Development”. The event, open to the public, and attended by over 50 participants, was designed as a kick-off for the writeshop deliberations which followed with a smaller group of invited experts.

The event took place at Sida Headquarters in Stockholm. It brought together speakers from Eastern and Southern Africa to discuss the role of women and the importance of gender in the contemporary agricultural development discourse.

I. Gender and Agriculture in Sweden's development policies

After SIANI coordinator *Melinda Fones-Sundell* introduced the seminar, *Prudence Woodford-Berger*, a Senior Analyst at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, opened with a discussion from Sweden’s development policy perspective on gender inequalities within agriculture. Central to this policy view is working from a structural power and rights perspective that acknowledges women’s right to food, health, non-discrimination, education, work and participation. Rural women are typically restricted to subsistence agriculture where they depend on their crops as a livelihood, source of employment and an essential economic buffer. Creating seed banks, developing new crop varieties and building access to communications infrastructures and knowledge networks are essential pathways of empowerment for these women and their organizations.

The visibility of women within development cooperation work is not yet representative of their central role and often hides the fact that women’s most important obstacle to working continues to be health problems, themselves mostly related to sexual and reproductive health. “Women are not ‘unrealised potential’, but they also can’t do it on their own” Woodford-Berger ended, advocating strong refocus and reinvestment of our development policies into supporting rural women.

II. What needs to be done to improve Government’s ability to institutionalize gender mainstreaming?

Next to speak was *Monica Munachonga*, a consultant from Zambia who told of her experience creating a gender mainstreaming agenda within an international development reform programme in her country. At first fighting to earn her place on the planning committee, Munachonga strategized to create greater participatory involvement in policy development and to indigenize gender within that process. She developed a twin-track solution: on one side, she aimed at bringing about institutional changes, lobbying decision-makers and implementers, and on the other, she emphasized gender as fundamental to capitalization of human resources. Participatory planning phases involving both women and men-led organizations developed into clear recommendations for the creation of a national policy on gender mainstreaming and the inclusion of gender focal points in all ministries and programmes.

Within organizations, they promoted strategic gender-focused sector-specific research studies to build sustainable sex-disaggregated databases and foster information sharing that could feed into government planning processes. These efforts culminated with the creation of a cabinet-level division specialized in gender mainstreaming.

The implementation of the planned gender policies has nevertheless proven problematic with inadequate diffusion of agreed-upon reforms, lack of monitoring programmes and even inertia from the involved international development cooperation. She concluded restating the importance of giving people and organizations the skills to analyse their situation in parallel to large structural changes. For gender mainstreaming to work, it has to be given its own funding and play a role as a performance indicator. Gender needs to be a business for both men and women.

III. A Grassroots perspective on supporting human rights and gender in rural communities

Violet Shivutse described her experience from working with GROOTS (Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood); the network of two thousand women-led grassroots associations that she works for in Kenya. GROOTS' development mandate came about while HIV was becoming a national emergency and the country underwent structural adjustment programmes. Working with HIV patients turned back from hospitals, widows and also orphans, it became evident that land and agriculture, as sources of power through livelihood, would become a central focus of their platform. T

To address these emerging issues, GROOTS first initiated the process of identifying common vulnerabilities and issues amongst its membership: Shivutse called this "mapping ourselves, our issues and our community structures". Working in parallel with feminist organizations, they reorganized around issues and leadership to back specific initiatives and form watchdog groups. These groups worked to connect and ally with men in power, thus bringing the custodians of power themselves into the grassroots process. Local-to-local dialogue was promoted as a way for grassroots women to engage governance head-on and hold their leaders accountable.

The second process involved identifying women in power in existing decision-making committees and build connections with them through common interest. They then collaborated to appoint women with roots and experience in the community to represent their communities within government, so-named *Champions of Transformative Leadership* who can lobby to acquire resources for and on behalf of women in need.

Helping women widowed by HIV remains a central focus of GROOT's efforts: by giving them the implements and methods to effectively cultivate a livelihood from the land left by their husbands and overcome disinheritance problems. GROOTS circulates the process of assessing needs and conducting training in order to continually shape their programmes in accordance with the needs of their constituency. When a grassroots movement is clearly led and organized, Shivutse advised to "design what you think will work, design a policy and go for it" and to continually tap knowledge elsewhere for greater visibility. "Organization is sustainable," she concluded.

IV. Women's Unfinished Struggle for Land in Zimbabwe

Dr. Rudo Gaidzanwa, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Zimbabwe followed with a presentation on "Women's Unfinished Struggle for Land in Zimbabwe". Access to land is one of the fundamental issues restricting women's equal participation in rural sector agriculture in Zimbabwe. Researchers are confronted with the reality that women are not recognized as legitimate inheritors in a patrilineal society, leading 30% of widowed rural women to emigrate to the city where free-holder land is available and their entrepreneurial drive is not be stifled by traditional social orders.

Gaidzanwa also shared the reality that some rural men see polygamy as a strategy to save on labour costs, particularly in export intensive crop cultivation and that these circumstances often correlate with higher suicide rates, among these women who feel completely disempowered. Women's inherited gender roles make it difficult for them to overcome husbands reluctant to write a will, assert the rights that come with traditional bride wealth and unofficial marriage variations that complicate inheritance laws or prevent them from holding the land they are traditionally entitled to as wives.

In Zimbabwe, HIV has united women to organize and care for each other as much as it has undermined their efforts, but as the country's political and economic crisis unfolded in the later half of the decade, the parallel drop in HIV infection rates allowed women to finally organize around consciousness of HIV risk. "HIV and the economic decline have changed the relationship between women and men," Gaidzanwa stated. "Women cope and adapt quicker than men, the economic and social decline has hit men very hard as their self-esteem and status disintegrate when they lose their jobs. Amongst all these shifting circumstances, we must recognize that women and men have different perspectives and relationships with the land and in so empower women to organize, network and mobilize around rural land-use and agriculture issues.

V. Gender in agriculture - a view from the agricultural cooperating partners group in Zambia.

Representing SIDA, *Dr. Eva Ohlsson* spoke of her experiences working with Sweden's development programmes in Zambia. Land inheritance rights, access to land and the means to cultivate it were again presented as central issues. Agriculture is considered an essential pillar of women's economic empowerment, whereby it can provide an income; it can support women to overcome or leave an abusive relationship or send their children to school, for example. Yet, there are few systems in place to introduce women to the knowledge, techniques and supply networks they would require to do this.

At present, accessible land is limited and subsidies have become too focused on "men and maize" as opposed to valuing food independence or net exportation. Any hope of reform would also require Agricultural Subsidies Programmes to be strictly time-bound and much better monitored. Ohlsson restated the need to clearly engage men as allies, champions and partners of women in agriculture. This is now seen as an essential preliminary component to realising Sida's "Farming as a business" agricultural programmes. Many of the larger obstacles faced by women in agriculture are also illustrated by the statistic that very few small farms have been able to participate in subsidized government agriculture and crop purchase schemes – securing the voting power of large land owners still seems to be the central consideration of these policies.

Ohlsson concluded by stating that there is no one approach to empowering farmers, much less rural women, and that gender-specific data and statistics need to be captured in order to understand the specific measures that can strengthen women's position and maximization of their human capital.

VI. Summing up and ways forward

Consultant Dr. Cathy Farnworth concluded the seminar with an overview of the themes discussed. She admitted to having witnessed important changes in gendered poverty statistics during her career, but none that have come close to overturning the salient yield gap between rural men and women in the developing world. Put simply, women still operate with fewer resources and therefore generate less output. If we are to address this reality and improve gender equality, then agriculture, as the intersect of a wealth of issues directly connected to women, is an important point of departure and continuing study. Farnworth applauded the day's presenters for demonstrating that gender in agriculture indeed matters and that we are fortunate to have inspiring actors, both at the policy development and grassroots level, working hard and creatively to push these issues.