

Gender and Climate change: South Africa Case Study

Executive Summary
by Dr Agnes Babugura



1. Introduction

The climate change discourse has engendered considerable international debates that have dominated the environmental agenda since the mid-1980s and addressing the threat of climate change has become a global priority. In the context of the significant attention to climate change at global level, debates regarding the identification of gender perspectives and the involvement of women in addressing climate change have arisen. It is believed that men and women will be differently vulnerable to climate change impacts due to existing inequalities such as, their roles and positions in society, access to resources and power relations that may affect their ability to respond to the effects of climate change (Commission on the Status of Women 2008; Carvajal et al. 2008; BRIDGE, 2008; WEDO 2007).

With particular attention to South Africa as a case study, this study examines the interrelations between climate change and gender so as to make a contribution to the discourse on the gender differentiated impacts of climate change. In addition, the study hopes to create awareness amongst policy and decision-makers about the need for gender differentiated climate change policies. The study makes use of current exposure to climate variability (which are associated with climate change) to explore the gender differentiated impacts that are predicted to worsen due to climate change.

a) Country situation

The profile and significance of climate change issues has gained momentum in South Africa over the last few years (Policy Discussion Document for the National Climate Change Response Policy 2009). The country is committed to playing its part as a global citizen to take the necessary action to respond to the challenge of climate change. As a starting point, South Africa is not only a signatory to both United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol but it has also participated in the UNFCCC processes and has done a substantial amount of work to meet its commitments in terms of the Convention and the Protocol (Policy Discussion Document for the National Climate Change Response Policy 2009). For example, it has developed a Greenhouse Gas Inventory, it has produced a first National Communication

that was submitted to the UNFCCC and is an active participant in the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) (policy Discussion Document for the National Climate Change Response Policy 2009).

Despite the momentum South Africa has gained regarding climate change, gender issues remain overlooked in the climate change policies that address adaptation. This is evident in the discussion documents on climate change (Policy Discussion Document for the National Climate Change Response Policy, A Climate Change R&D Strategy for South Africa and South African Country Study on Climate Change Vulnerability & Adaptation Assessment). Generally there seems to be a lack of knowledge regarding gender and climate change in South Africa. Apart from studies such as Banda (2005) and Sterrett (2007) very little gender analysis based research has been undertaken to understand how climate change will impact men and women differently in South Africa.

In trying to understand gender and climate change in the context of South Africa, it is important to appreciate gender and gender relations in South Africa. South Africa presents a unique situation for political reasons. Since the establishment of the democratic government in 1994, various significant developments have occurred to set the pace towards building gender equality in the country. Having recognized that gender is dynamic and that gender roles are neither natural nor sacred, a number of progressive policies and legislation have been put in place to set the context for gender transformation. This is to encourage a situation in which women and men can make real choices about their own lives and other issues. With such commitment, South Africa has enormous potential to address the gender differentiated impacts and vulnerability to climate change. It is also important to acknowledge that in spite of the major gains, there still remain enormous disparities and inequalities amongst men and women. The most significant challenges are faced by women in rural areas who are still living in poverty with limited resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods.

b) Description of the Study Areas

The study was conducted in rural areas located in the



uMzinyathi and uMhlathuze district municipalities. UMzinyathi and UMhlathuze are amongst the various municipalities situated in KwaZulu-Natal which is a province on the east coast of South Africa. It is South Africa's most populous province with a population of 9,426,017 million people. Apart from being South Africa's most populous province, KwaZulu-Natal has the biggest poverty gap of R18 billion with 61% of the population living in poverty (HSRC 2004).

Underdevelopment, limited basic services, poverty, high levels of unemployment and low educational levels are some of the characteristics of the two rural communities in which the study was conducted. In terms of livelihoods, the rural communities rely mostly on agricultural activities. With regards to household structure, female headed households are the majority in both rural communities.

2. Methodology

The study made use of qualitative research techniques guided by a combination of gender analysis tools. The techniques include participatory rural appraisal in the form of focus group discussions, role play, life histories and key informant interviews. Through these techniques, primary data was collected to understand the differences in gender roles, activities, needs, and opportunities in the context of climate change.

3. Key Findings

Climate change poses a risk for both men and women in the study areas given that they are both poverty stricken with a high dependency on agriculture and

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natural resource for their livelihoods. Based on current experiences with climate variability, climate change is likely to increase their poverty levels heightening the men and women's already existing vulnerabilities.

Current coping mechanisms merely allow the men and women to focus on short-term survival rather than long-term adaptation. The coping strategies (e.g. social grants, government relief, seasonal employment and informal trade) which are a critical aspect of the communities are viewed as alternatives to adaptation. In addition, ability to adapt and build resilience to climate change is compromised by a combination of other factors such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, governance and inability to effectively implement programs and policies designed to enhance the lives of men and women. These factors further affect adaption as they also hinder men and women's ability to recover from the impacts of climatic events.

Gender differentiated impacts of climate variability were manifested in the unequal distribution of roles and responsibilities of men and women in both study areas. Results reveal that through socially constructed roles and responsibilities, women seem to bear the most burdens resulting from climate variability impacts. For example women were found to be responsible for more of the household chores than men, including fetching water and collecting thatching grass. Women's burdens were more evident in their response to the impacts

of climate variability. Women were found to have extra workloads when faced with climatic stressors as they made efforts to cope with them. For example, in attempting to increase household economic security, women turned to other sources of income such as selling of fruits and second hand clothing. This work was carried out in addition to normal household duties. Working longer hours than the men affected them not only physically but emotionally drained them as they constantly had to worry about the well-being of their household members, especially children and the youth who depend on them.

The men on the other hand though not working as hard as the women, were impacted by climate variability. The impact on men were found to be more psychological than physical. Their psychological effects are further compounded by unemployment resulting in negative coping mechanisms. There is therefore no doubt that climate change will impact differently on rural men and women.

With more women diversifying their livelihoods, gender roles are also being impacted. There is a change in gender roles to accommodate responses to the impacts of climate variability. In this study it was evident that women are now involved in activities that generate earnings, thus reshaping relationships between men and women. The income generated by the women through trade is used to sustain the household. Women generating an income also have more opportunities and power to decide what the income can be used for.

The shift is also driven by the country's constitution, gender legislation in the province (Kwazulu-Natal), the need for women to provide for their families and the women's determination to see change that will improve their position in society. The women have also come to realize that it will take more than the constitution and decent laws to end gender inequalities. They strongly believe that in addition to the constitution and the laws, men need to accept the changing role of women

in post-apartheid society. The women are aware that the constitution and the laws simply provide an enabling environment and a platform, from which the women can voice their concerns. The rest depends on their determination to make the laws and the constitution work for them.

The study revealed that women are very knowledgeable and innovative with regards to coping with the impacts of the changing climate. Lessons can be drawn from their knowledge on how women can be better assisted to adapt to climate change. Results confirm that women play an important role in supporting households and communities to cope and adapt to climate variability.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

There is no doubt that climate change will impact on men and women differently. Based on experiences of current exposure to climate related hazards, women are predicted to be the most vulnerable to climate change. However in agreement with Leary *et al* (2007), there is also a need to bear in mind that, vulnerability to climate change is complex and shaped by many interacting processes. These include social, economic, ecological, institutional, technological and governance processes. As climate changes, the exposures and risks will also change. As a result, adaptation will be needed to respond to the changing exposures and risks from climate stressors. With so many uncertainties much more extensive research is needed to fully understand gender differentiated impacts and vulnerabilities to climate change. The gender differentiated impacts need to be understood in the context of the above interacting processes that shape vulnerability as well as adaptation to climate change. It is through this much needed knowledge that policies can be effectively informed.

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South Africa's commitment to achieving gender equality has enormous potential to address gender differentiated impacts and vulnerability to climate change. Though the gender policies and institutions are not directed at addressing climate change, they address gender inequalities that are predicted to heighten women's vulnerability to climate change.

South Africa therefore needs to take advantage of already existing gender institutions (Provincial Men's Forum (PMF) of KwaZulu-Natal, the Department for Women, Rural Women's Movement, and Education) to improve women's position in society and address climate change from a gender perspective. These institutions should be used as a platform to create awareness about gender differentiated impacts of climate change and also make sure that issues of gender and climate change are kept on the agenda.

The same institutions should be used for capacity building. There is a great need for literacy and gender empowerment. This can be done through poverty alleviation, development of safety nets, physical infrastructure, enhancement of skills and easy credit access to support innovation. These approaches are very crucial in bridging the gender gaps which in turn will not only reduce gender differences but also reduce gender differentiated impacts of climate change.

Given that the study reveals women are very knowledgeable about environmental changes and how to cope with these changes, women need not be seen just as victims but as members of society that can effect

change. For this reason women's participation in decision-making is essential as they have much more to contribute towards effective climate change policies.

There is a need for gender activists to create public awareness that will bring about change in attitudes towards gender in terms of traditions, customs, stereotypes and discrimination.

Laws must be enforced to ensure gender inclusion in all climate change policies. In addition effective monitoring and evaluation systems must be put in place to measure progress. Monitoring and evaluation is critical for establishing accountability and ensuring that gender needs are being taken into account.

Early warning systems giving information on the timing, length and adequacy of rainfall, or research into crop species that are more resilient to climate variation would be very beneficial to both men and women.

To effectively address issues of gender and climate change, focus must not only be on negative gender experiences but also assess and acknowledge progress that has been made in addressing gender issues and social changes. Lessons from positive experiences can be used to guide the way forward in achieve gender equality.

Mainstreaming gender into climate change policy is very critical and requires a holistic approach. While addressing issues relating to gender inequality it is also vital to look beyond gender inequality and assess the different needs and choices that men and women make that eventually impact on their way of life and the way they respond to climate related impacts.

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Published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation Southern Africa

Heinrich Boell Stiftung Southern Africa | 123 Hope street, The Avalon Building, Gardens 8001, Cape Town
tel: +27-(0)21-461 62 66 | fax: +27-(0)21-462 71 87 | www.boell.org.za