

Economic change and gender relations planning in the Pearl Lagoon Basin



Orinoco children: A younger generation with changing attitudes
Photo: Jesse Hill

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Why and how do gender relations change? Rapid appraisal methods, which mainly focus on tangible information, may not be sufficient to understand these questions. Based on experiences with development processes near the Pearl Lagoon Basin of Nicaragua, this article highlights the need for participatory, gender-based research as a basis for development planning, particularly in situations of turbulent change.

In the Pearl Lagoon Basin in the Southern Autonomous Region of Nicaragua, thirteen small farmer-fishing communities are in a state of economic flux and social despair. A major reason has been the shift from an economic model based on a combination of subsistence production and wage-labour, to a market economy. The shift began in the seventies, when foreign companies in the area started to withdraw from their unsustainable exploitation of the area's natural resources, taking with them the opportunity for wage labour. A second reason that further exacerbated the situation was the abandonment of subsistence production.

The present situation is one of rapid change, driven by an influx of cheap commodities from foreign countries. The communities' lack of experience with entrepreneurship, as well as traditional economic laws and quality standards that do not meet the demands of an international economy, mean that transition to a new sustainable production model will not be easy. Moreover, this change takes place in a setting where local structures are dominated by men and patriarchal ideologies.

The Garifuna fisherwomen's cooperative

In 1995, the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (URACCAN) started an Integral Development Project for the Pearl Lagoon Basin. The project

contains different components that address integrated community development as a process of dynamic interaction between cultural, social, economic and productive dimensions.

One of the target groups, the fisherwomen's cooperative of Orinoco village, is with 70 members one of the bigger organisational units in the area. When I came to work at URACCAN-Bluefields in February 1997, the only activity of the cooperative was the letting of its motorboat. A rapid assessment revealed that almost none of the members were actually involved in fishery-related activities or had any ambition to be involved. Instead, they were almost exclusively interested in raising chickens. This surprised me, as Garifuna women were known to be fishers as well as farmers. In 1991, 60% of Orinoco's fishers were still women. And why produce chickens, when outside the community people buy *Pollo Tiptop*, the frozen ones?

Research

With the community, we started a Participatory Rapid Rural Appraisal (PRRA) focusing on production. The main conclusions were the following:

- 1) The community has abandoned the production of at least sixteen basic food and cash crops. The major reasons for abandoning agriculture were:
 - The civil war, when people avoided the fields out of fear.
 - The lack of technical and financial support required to rehabilitate farming.
 - Fishing, especially after the introduction of the gill nets, has become more lucrative than agriculture.
- 2) While men and women used to fish and farm together, now few women participate. Women still engage in fish-processing and in the shrimp harvest;
- 3) The food security crisis could be solved. Access to credit would make it possible to produce what is now imported, and to export to outside markets.

Not taking into consideration culture, customs, needs, wishes, attitudes, etc., the inhabitants automatically took a Marxist position: With improved economic opportunities, cultural habits would change and improve. All change was expected to come from outside: Credit and a market would be the keys to prosperity. A random sample of people's reactions: "Everyone does whatever he likes, because nobody gives any help to Orinoco"; "The community doesn't develop because there is no work"; and, "With access to credit and access to a market we all would be working the fields".

After considering the results so far, I felt we were not ready to start participatory planning. The reasons behind the changing production model were not fully explored and the changes in division of labour and access to production resources by gender were taken for granted. A second research phase became necessary. URACCAN students visited one out of every ten households, interviewing men and women of different age groups. Subjects were firstly the changing livelihood systems, including personal behaviour at household, communal and (inter)national family systems. Secondly we questioned the sustainability of

Orinoco's production model and women's, men's and young people's ideas and habits by asking the interviewees to comment on three statements:

- 1) Orinoco is changing into a 'bedroom community': People are abandoning the fields, over-exploitation of fishery resources is leading to reduction of food and income and dependency from migrant remittances is growing;
- 2) Women used to be more dedicated to productive activities than they are now;
- 3) The new generation likes quick earnings. Investing money, time and energy in agriculture and cattle is old-fashioned.

These questions and their answers were eye-openers for the community members themselves. Until now they had been worried about the reduction in agricultural and fisheries' production per unit effort, but they had never wondered why the behaviour of women or youth had changed and what the consequences of these changes would be for the future economic and social well-being of the individual, the household and the community. The results also led to clues for discussions on gender.

Community discussions on gender dynamics

One outcome of the investigation was the revelation that more than half of the households are receiving migrant remittances from family abroad. For a quarter of the families, these are the main source of income. Discussing this point eventually led to greater awareness of the vulnerable position of women. When we asked what happens when an eighteen-year-old boy leaves his girlfriend behind for a couple of years, everybody started to laugh. It is commonly agreed that Orinoco's young men are not monogamous. Although other kinship relations than marriage play a role in a woman's subsistence strategies, the situation of poverty makes the husband's contribution crucial to subsistence. We discussed the fact that in a sample of 24 women all but two learned to farm or to fish or both, but only one of them is currently farming and four sometimes go fishing. What does this mean for Orinoco's daughters, who are growing up without learning any productive skills?

We also discussed why women might be retiring from productive activity. Since the introduction of gill nets, fishing is considered to be men's work and too hard for women. A suggestion that the increased profitability might be a determining factor for changing gender roles was rejected. Regarding women's (non) involvement in agriculture, several additional observations were made: that women today are lazier, that beliefs have changed - men should support the family and women should stay at home, and that women nowadays have fewer rights than they once did.

By comparing two generations, we were able to see how withdrawal from fisheries and agricultural labour is advancing. Almost none of the young people dedicate themselves to productive activities. The elders describe them as 'dreamers', 'preferring sports and drinking over work', 'confused about the progress of modernity', 'vicious', and 'without patience'.

Another discussion dealt with the breakdown of social networks. A conclusion was that in the Pearl Lagoon area, where traditions of barter and mutual help are breaking down, helping others with work, food, money or means of production has a gender-related price. Women appear to have limited ways to obtain cash and to exchange services and products. It was concluded that although women have less access to cash than earlier, they now have to pay for services and for using means of production or transport owned by men, things that used to be free of charge. Women feel their need for money is urgent. They do manage part of their husband's earnings, but they are generally unaware of his total income. Some women make a little money from baking bread and cake or

from commercial activity. Most have a few chickens for subsistence or exchange.

Design and implementation of plans

After the community members gave feedback on the conclusions, they were able to design a long-term development plan with gender perspective for the community and a women-focused, short-term strategy.

The community stressed the importance of traditional culture for a prospering Orinoco. Revival and ownership of the traditional culture, particularly by youth, would lead to constructive attitudes towards community building. The cultural revival should extend beyond cultural activities to traditional productive and commercial activities, and this could be a focus for the socio-economic or women's component in its first phase.

The women's cooperative, supported by participants of other components of the project, made a plan for starting the production activities. In 1999 we started a credit fund managed by the community, for the cooperative to run a shop and to sell fish and shrimps bought from the fishermen. Credit was also given to individual women organised in small groups for commercial activities such as a shop or a guesthouse, cattle breeding, agriculture and horticulture. Professionals and URACCAN students provided technical assistance where needed. The high level of repayment, in a region where a culture of not refunding credit dominates, reflects the commitment of the beneficiaries - undoubtedly enhanced by the extensive identification and planning process. In the next phase, a start was made with product diversification (new crops, reforestation, pig breeding, eco- and cultural tourism etc) and the introduction of non-traditional economic activities for women.

Conclusion

Rapid Rural Appraisal methods are very useful for analysing transforming productive models, including the roles of women and men. However, they are not enough and had to be complemented with more extensive research. *After combining information on people's participation in productive work and their share in the benefits of production, their income and expenses (by age and by gender) with knowledge of their norms and perceptions (by age and by gender)*, we had a rich input for discussions on community development, household development and women's development. This in turn paved the way for a participatory design of gender-sensitive development plans. The Garifuna women still face many difficulties, but they are regaining territory while developing traditional production. No longer was the solution for the precarious situation of decreasing agricultural activity, impoverishment and perceived overexploitation of natural resources only to be found in the generation of credit and new market perspectives. Instead, members of the community related the negative spiral and changing economic circumstances to changing cultural habits and preferences with gender dimensions and treated them as such. No longer do Orinoco women see breeding chickens as the only alternative to domestic work. ■

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