



Vulnerability of Rural Households in Vietnam (Son La Province) – A Network Analysis of Risk-Management

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Summary

Poor and vulnerable households in Vietnam and elsewhere have a fragile and very finely balanced livelihood system. Shocks and crises can destabilise the households for many years and have an effect on the welfare and livelihood strategies of the household members. To buffer those shocks, people develop various risk-management and risk-coping strategies, using their five forms of capital assets, i.e. natural, physical, human, social and financial assets. One of those strategies is the formation, maintenance and use of social networks. In developing countries, social networks are a very important form of social capital as often a formal (public) safety net is incomplete or non-existing. In those cases, the social networks often serve as informal risk-sharing arrangements and thus, are based on reciprocity.

In Yen Chau District of the mountainous Northern Vietnam, three households of two ethnic minorities were selected to investigate their risk-management and risk-coping strategies in case of a crisis. Focus was on their social networks used to cope with a crisis, especially on the relationships between network members and on the tangible help provided. Four hypotheses concerning network formation were set concerning kinship, wealth, education and place of residence. Information was obtained through use of a semi-structured, gender-sensitive questionnaire as well as several tools of the Participatory Rural Appraisal. Quantitative network data were analysed using the software UCINET.

Kinship turned out to be the major factor for network formation. Additionally, the level of wealth is an important and influencing factor, not only for the formation but also for the size of networks. Further outcomes were: The poorer the households, the smaller their networks. Altruistic feelings are not the main reason for support but self-interest. Thus, mutuality is of utmost significance and when not guaranteed or anticipated, support is very limited. The network capacities of poor people are much earlier reached than those of richer people. Therefore, social networks are able to provide a basic support but are insufficient to entirely buffer a crisis of a poor or vulnerable household. Consequently, this calls for policy interventions like the introduction of a formal safety net. It is crucial to adapt policies to the given societal structures to avoid a destruction or undermining of functioning networks, but also to meet the requirements of the people most in need. For that reason, it is also necessary to follow a gender-specific approach and incorporate gender-specific aspects in policy suggestions. Hence, a part of the research investigated gender roles in two ethnic minorities like the gender-specific labour division, the power structures, possession of assets and the decision-making process. It was further investigated if gender roles have an

influence on the formation of informal risk-sharing arrangements/social networks and if risk-management strategies vary between women and men.

It was found, that men possess livestock, crops and farming land but despite of that, assets are shared. There is no strict labour division. Nevertheless, there are certain tasks, especially concerning livestock and housework, which are usually accomplished by women. Decisions are ultimately taken by men, but women, being the money managers, are well involved in the decision-making process. The risk-management strategies hardly vary between women and men. In case of a crisis, it is the household who makes use of an existing social network, not individual persons.