Nepal

Bringing voices of poor women to the climate change debate

Capturing and channeling women’s adaptation experiences to policy-makers

ActionAid International (In partnership with ActionAid Nepal and IDS)

Abstract

In Nepal, poor rural women will suffer greatly from climate change, and policy and funding must take their needs into account. Although they have significant knowledge to share about adapting their agricultural practices to build resilience to weather-related hazards and reduce disaster losses, they do not participate in any decision-making on climate change policies. They also have adaptive strategies and mechanisms already in place. An action research initiative allows Nepalese women in poor and remote communities to use video as a means of communicating their climate change concerns and experience to policy-makers at local and national levels. It addresses the serious gap between climate change policy makers and women at the grassroots who are already amongst the most affected by climate change. It also empowers grassroots women to become advocates for change instead of passive objects of research. This has developed their capacity to keep their issues on the ever-evolving policy agenda.
How the initiative links Gender, DRR and Climate Change

Evidence shows that women are more affected by disasters and because of power imbalances between men and women they are likely to experience the most negative impact of climate change on their health, food security, access to water and livelihoods. For women, making sure their voices are taken into account in climate change and disaster risk reduction policies is a human rights issue. The initiative gives voice to their gendered experience of increasing weather and climate-related disasters. It also sheds light on women's capacities and their climate change adaptation activities, which include disaster risk reduction techniques to specifically combat flood, droughts and other weather-related disasters increasing with climate change. This repositions grassroots women in the climate change policy debate because they have the right to participate and are a source of knowledge for adaptation.

The Initiative

This initiative captures the experiences, opinions, needs and recommendations of poor women in isolated Nepalese communities, to feed into the climate change adaptation policy and funding process. The films are recorded by the women, who then write a storyboard that guides local NGOs when editing. Clips from the interviews are presented to stakeholders at local to national level working on the design of Nepal’s National Adaptation Plan of Action.

This research developed from an initial study by ActionAid and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University. This study examined how women are coping with and adapting to climate change, and their most urgent needs for adapting their livelihoods. It took place in the aftermath of the disaster triggered by monsoon floods in 2007 in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. In Nepal, the study took place in the in the village development committees (VDCs) of Matehiya and Suryapatuwa in the districts Banke and Bardiya in the mid-western development region, highly vulnerable to climate change impact. VDCs are the smallest government administrative units. The villages have no electricity and no transport links, and were chosen because they are high risk areas inhabited by poor communities deprived of basic services. This is a result of factors including the civil conflict, and the population’s dependence on agricultural livelihoods that have been severely affected by changes to the monsoon pattern.

The study asked women what they wanted to adapt to climate change and reduce risk of disasters that would destroy their livelihoods. Focus groups of women were asked about their existing strategies and mechanisms to cope with the increase in flooding and what they perceived as the main constraints and barriers to effectively securing their livelihoods. Teachers, local authorities, saving and credit groups and local associations involved in the management of water and forestry resources were also used as key informants and to validate the information collected in the focus groups.

The action research initiative’s methodology had the following steps:

- Workshop to train research team, presentation of project to women and local organisations in project locations (climate change high risk areas in Nepal where ActionAid works)
- Train women and partners in the use of cameras and storyboarding to ensure local organisations do not alter messages when editing.
- Women interview each other and use cameras to document their problems and produce short films
- The last stage will be to present the videos to government officials, academics and other policy-makers.
Good Practices and Lessons Learned

Now communities and local partners have been successfully trained in the use of video-cameras. Evidence shows that women and local organizations ‘own’ the process. Since the completion of training, short videos have already been produced and edited independently of ActionAid and the process facilitator.

In this phase special attention has been put on the sustainability and mainstreaming of the project. For example, the camera being used is a low-cost and easy-to-use model that can be charged with car battery power if needed.

The initial study We know what we need: South Asian Women speak out on Climate Change Adaptation was authored by IDS and ActionAid. The action research to empower women to become advocates of the recommendations identified in that first study is led by an IDS postgraduate student and researcher with the support from ActionAid and partners, Bheri Excellence Environment Group, Nepal Agroforestry Foundation (NAF) and IDS.

The Good Practice

This initiative is a good practice because it gives women the space to participate and tell policy makers what they want, instead of being assumed to be vulnerable, powerless victims of climate change. It encourages a shift from researching ‘about’ gender issues, towards action research that can generate change led by women themselves. This offers an alternative to other research that is undertaken to influence policy. Conventional research is extractive: it does not help women to participate in the policy-focused advocacy that outside organizations are trying to use to improve the women’s own lives. Organizations need to lead by example to allow communities to speak for themselves.

The initiative responds to recommendations on gender, climate change and disaster risk reduction that relate to the need for practical tools to support women to engage in debates and planning, and to sensitize decision-makers to the advantages of equal participation.
Lesson(s) Learned

Although the women had a very good understanding of the problems they face and very clear priorities for adaptation, they might not necessarily know about all the alternatives that could be available to support their livelihood adaptation. Future research projects could consider giving additional input to the focus group discussions to enrich their analysis, for example through data available on the predicted climatic changes in their region.

It might also be useful to conduct this research with both women's and men's groups to study where they are aligned and where they might conflict. It is important that climate change adaptation measures effectively improve the resilience of the community as a whole whilst promoting greater gender equality.

Impacts & Results

This initiative furthers gender equality by facilitating representation of women in the policy arena and effectively highlighting how their experience and insights can help policy-makers ensure climate change responses make a difference to the worst affected groups.

The concrete achievement at the local level is that women are more able to participate in the research project to reflect on their situations, articulate their concerns, and identify the actions that they believe will translate into a positive change in their conditions.

Evidence of this can be seen by the various short and long term adaptation techniques adopted by the women, such as the adoption of bio-engineering techniques to minimize the effects of flood, adoption of less labour intensive technologies, the initiation of multiple cropping and intercropping practices, investment in alternative irrigation methods, the introduction of early paddy of short duration, the practice of homestead rising, and the promotion of alternative energy technology like solar energy, biogas and improved cooking stoves.

The women shared their experiences of these methods and then critically discussed them to determine their effectiveness. Through the process they identified the factors that would increase their resilience, such as strengthening social practices and community safety nets to support livelihoods and reduce financial risk.

“If we do not change our attitudes and practices, it is difficult to survive in the changing conditions. We are adapting systems like the ones used by migrant hill societies. We are strengthening our social institutions to cope with flood and drought by providing support to each other; like food and shelter for our flood-affected neighbours”
- Muna Mukeri, 55, from Matehiya, Nepal in research report.

The Challenges

One of the main challenges of this initiative is to ensure that the findings of the research and the voices of these women are consistently fed into relevant policy dialogues and valued as substantive contributions to the debate. Qualitative research on grass-root perspectives is often considered mere ‘anecdotal’ evidence and therefore shadowed by facts and figures that are arguably considered a better representation of reality. The key to overcoming this is to build the local capacity of poor and excluded groups to engage in people-centred advocacy. This is precisely the focus of the second phase of this initiative.
Potential for Replication

The research project outlined above could be relevant and applicable in all other contexts since the process itself can be easily adapted. It can be most easily adopted and adapted by organizations working on climate change and disaster risk reduction that wish to do more work on gender and women's rights. The method could be especially relevant in regions where there is no documented research specifically targeted to ask poor and excluded women what they want in relation to climate change adaptation or disaster risk reduction. Information on the specific challenges and strategies adopted by women facing risks of a different nature or environment, such as in urban areas, would also contribute to the policy understanding of women’s priorities, and empower them through the process.