Does resilience-based management of communal grazing land address gender inequity? A case study in the highlands of Ethiopia

Lemlem Aregu¹, Ika Darnhofer² and Maria Wurzinger³

The literature on resilience indicates that diversity in social-ecological resilience plays an important role to enable the system to cope with and adapt to change. However, more attention has been given to the influence of ecological diversity than to social diversity. Social diversity arises from e.g. age, ethnicity, wealth and gender. In communities dependent on natural resources, each of these social distinctions lead to differences in roles, thus influencing the interaction with natural resources and the knowledge about them. Social differences, especially linked to gender, also tend to be linked to differences in power, and thus control over resources. Yet, it is unclear whether harnessing social differences – e.g. through including women in decision-making bodies so as to include their knowledge and take their needs into account – can be directly linked to an increased resilience of the social-ecological system, i.e. its persistence, adaptability and transformability.

This analysis builds on a case-study which aimed at capturing whether women were excluded from the management of communal grazing land, and how this exclusion may impact the resilience of this social-ecological system. The community studied is in the highlands of Ethiopia, where the farming system is subsistence-oriented, with the communal grazing land playing a key role, esp. in ensuring adequate nutrition for oxen used in ploughing and dairy cows. Data was collected through focus group discussions and key informant interviews and analysed through content analysis.

The results show that women are excluded from informal institutions governing the use and management of communal grazing land resources, so that their preferences are not taken into consideration. For example, women have been banned from harvesting a specific grass species used to craft traditional plates; oxen are systematically privileged over dairy cows whose produce women control; and women-headed households – which are often poorer and thus do not own cattle – tend to be excluded from access to the grazing land altogether. Yet, while there are clear social injustices, the grazing land has been managed in a fairly sustainable manner for the last 20 years despite a variety of shocks and stresses. Thus – from the point of view of ensuring a sustainable management of the natural resource – there is no apparent need to address women’s exclusion. The case could thus be made that the gender dimension is not relevant for resilience thinking. And indeed, very few papers in the resilience literature address gender issues.

Yet, we argue that this ‘gender blindness’ is problematic for three reasons. Firstly, the exclusion impoverishes the knowledge base, so that future adaptation options might be overlooked. Secondly, excluding women can undermine the legitimacy of institutions, thus threatening the whole management system. And thirdly, being ‘gender blind’ may make resilience-thinking attractive to those who wish to perpetuate gender inequality. Indeed, as resilience becomes more popular in policy circles, claiming the aim of managing natural resources for resilience can be used as a justification to continue excluding marginalised social groups.

Keywords: Social structures, Equity, Diversity, Legitimacy, Natural resource management

¹ L. Aregu is from Centre for Development Research (CDR), University of Natural Resources and Life Science, Vienna, Austria; lemlem627@yahoo.com
² I. Darnhofer is from the Dept. of Economics and Social Sciences, University of Natural Resources and Life Science, Vienna, Austria; ika.darnhofer@boku.ac.at
³ M. Wurzinger is from the Dept. of Sustainable Agricultural Systems, University of Natural Resources and Life Science, Vienna, Austria; maria.wurzinger@boku.ac.at