

August 2010

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Gender and access to land in Senegal

Land is all about relationships between humanity and land as a natural resource. Thus, land is not only an economic good or commodity, it also has important social, political and cultural factors underpinning its access, operation and control.

Gender is a critical variable in relation to this important resource in that it helps us to better understand the role of women and men in institutions. Whether these are formal or informal, local or global: besides cultural and social standards, the division of labour is a key factor that determines access and control of land. This is made clear by asking questions such as:

Who has the power in these institutions? How are resources managed? Which actors are benefitting?

This means that the gender perspective is important because it provides a link between the theoretical and practical dimensions (F. Diop, 2006) in the field of land management. It can also lead to the emergence of a new approach to citizenship which argues that development cannot be achieved within a context where individuals' rights are not recognised. This approach justifies the need to consider women who constitute 52% (RGHP 2002) of the total Senegalese population, when addressing access to resources, striving for sustainable development and food security.

Agriculture contributes on average nearly 20% of GDP and employs

70% of the workforce. 59.3% of the population, or approximately 6 out of 10 Senegalese, live in rural areas. These are characteristics of a rural economy heavily dependent on agriculture. This justifies the fact that in Senegal any coherent policy of development must have a sound rural and agricultural base (LOASP, 2004). The results of the investigation we found in the GESTES study show wide disparities in access and management of resources. The land is not only agricultural, it is pastoral, and includes gathering and processing of some natural resources, etc. Gathering natural products was formerly reserved for women, children and marginalized populations without land, but more and more, this activity now involves a large number of individuals because of the farm income crisis.

The survey shows that land ownership in rural households in Senegal is 84.90% nationally. However, the figures vary slightly depending on eco-geographic areas. As expected, the rates of ownership are higher in areas of low population density where land issues seem to be less visible. Thus, eastern Senegal is in the lead with 93.33%, followed closely by Casamance with 92.91% and the forestry/pastoral zone with 84.62%. In contrast, rates are lower in the Valley (80.16%) in the Niayes (80.13%) and in the Groundnut Basin (79.91%), where high densities often involve greater pressure on land.

The programme

The overall objective of this pan-african programme of research is to contribute to making available good quality, reliable and accessible information systems through the application of the P-GIS approach to improve natural resource management (water, land and forest in particular) and promote food security. The programme will also support social change in study countries (Benin, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Senegal, Tunisia) by developing P-GIS as methodological tools for participation and to inform decision-making.

These last two areas are characterized respectively by the increasing implementation of agro-industry and speculation related to the strong demand for land for housing.

In the different eco-geographical zones, inheritance, bequests, gifts and loans emerge as the principal means of access to land. These types of access prior to the law on state land property (assignment) still retain a large social legitimacy. Often, these forms of access (family allowance, legacy) in which men are privileged, serve as reference for local officials who administer the land, because they are well rooted in their socio-mental and socio-cultural universe. Thus, it is largely admitted that access to land is highly dependent on the social status (ethnicity, social class, etc..) and family status (special position that men and women occupy in the household) of individuals.

Focusing on the gender of household heads, the results show 94.53% of households with land are headed by a man and 5.47% are headed by women. For households with no land, 87.78% are managed by men, whereas 12.22% are made up of women.

There are some cases of individual ownership of land by women. Taking into account these special cases can help better appreciate the role of women within the family and their effective participation in land activities. They are usually widows or divorced women: in any case whose special status turns into de facto heads of household.

Apart from these specific cases, women's access to land varies according to eco-geographical zones.

In Casamance, over 60% of women report having

access to land, in eastern Senegal, it is almost 70% of women who have access to land. In areas of the Ferlo, River Valley and Niayes, the percentages are smaller and vary between 20 and 30%. Exclusively practiced by women in some parts of the Casamance, rice growing accounts for a high rate of access in this area. In contrast, in areas where production systems require more participation from all members of the family (family farms in the Senegal River Valley and the Niayes), the percentages are lower. However, instead of individual access to land, women often have access to land through the family and women's associations.

First and foremost, women turn to their families for access to land. This reflects the fact that the land is considered a family asset. A single young man gets access to land through his father, brother or other male relatives, a woman through her husband. But the older the woman, the easier it is for her to gain access through her family, her husband or her sons.

It should be noted that whether women belong to rich or poor families, access is largely dependent on their particular position in the family or household. Access to land may differ depending on marital status, childbearing, age, rank of wife in a polygamous marriage. Thus, gender is at the intersection of other categories that simultaneously determine the social position of women and can make easy or difficult their access to resources.

A consideration of family context can thus account for the differing circumstances of women and their particular conditions of access to resources; the only thing is that they are all connected to the family. However, the logic behind family-run production would like the ratio

of women to land to be limited to the possibility of operating and not to ownership of land, because of power relations. It is the male head of the household who manages and controls land; as head of the family, he has powers of decision, both in production and in distribution of resources.

Thus, despite a formal recognition (2001 Constitution, SNEEG) of the right of women to land, social or cultural claims are always made to justify their limited access to resources.

Figure 1: Women's access to land according to eco-geographical zones

