

13

Indigenous knowledge and climate change in rural Namibia: A gendered approach

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1972, robust literature about the need for men and women to respond to the impacts of climate change has emerged. The international response to climate change is embodied in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UNFCCC that was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 has been in force since 1994. The ultimate objective of the UNFCCC is to:

‘... achieve stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous human-induced interference with the climate system within a timeframe sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.’ (UNFCCC cited in Kyoto 2, 2008.)

The strategies envisaged by both scientists and politicians are based on the combination of adaptation, mitigation and use of indigenous knowledge (MET, 2011a, 2011b & 2011c). Mitigation, adaptation and integration of indigenous knowledge require both men and women to participate equally in decisions pertaining to adjusting ecological, social or economic systems in response to observed climate change, and a process of curtailing greenhouse gas emissions and other anthropogenic interventions. However, traditional configuration of gender roles means that women and men have multiple responsibilities in the home, at the workplace and in the community. These traditional demands, however, leave women with less time for active participation in

the decision-making processes that impact their lives, environment and aspirations (Lambrou & Piana, 2006).

The aim of this chapter is to present perspectives on gender, climate change and indigenous knowledge in rural Namibia. The research had three objectives. The first objective is to explore the gender–climate–change nexus and examine the relevance of indigenous knowledge regarding this. The significance of indigenous knowledge in climate change is the subject of increasing attention in rural Namibia. Namibian Government policy emphasizes the importance of identifying and applying indigenous approaches to challenges facing the nation (GRN, 2004, p. 122). Therefore, reflection on indigenous knowledge is essential to address climate change, which is considered one of the challenges in rural Namibia (Reid, Sahlén, MacGregor, & Stage, 2007). The second objective is to highlight areas of vulnerability to climate change, which indigenous knowledge will be relevant towards addressing in rural Namibia. Lastly, this research suggests a mechanism to make indigenous knowledge explicit in rural Namibia.

The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, we explain the context of the study by elucidating the Namibian economy and potential impacts of climate change. This section concludes with the explanation of our observations pertaining to the opinion of the Namibian rural public on climate change effects. In the second section, we explore the role of indigenous knowledge in the climate change and gender nexus. The gender and climate change framework is presented to simplify women's and men's differential access to natural resources. As the dichotomy between climate change and gender becomes clear, we elaborate the significance of indigenous knowledge in rural Namibia. This is followed by gender-disaggregated vulnerability to climate change in areas of flooding and drought; firewood and forestry; subsistence agriculture; and health. Finally, we present recommendations to empower women when responding to gender-disaggregated climate change vulnerability and suggest a mechanism to make indigenous knowledge explicit in rural Namibia.

NAMIBIAN BACKGROUND

Economy

The Namibian economy relies heavily on natural resources, many of which are climate sensitive. Agriculture, fisheries and mining, which account for 24% of the GDP, form the pillar of the country's economy (MET, 2011a). About 61% of Namibia's population lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture for a subsistence livelihood (Kuvare, Maharero, & Kamupingene, 2008). The Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment Report (Angula, Siyambango, & Conteh, 2012) revealed that although