

**Sustaining Women's Agricultural Livelihoods: Why Can't Global Institutions Get it
Right? Aruna Rao**

In Women Reclaiming Sustainable Livelihoods: Spaces gained, Spaces lost

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Since the 1970s, research has clearly demonstrated the critical link between women's work and agriculture and food production. Yet, development aid institutions have consistently failed in supporting women's agricultural work. Despite staggering global hunger and poverty statistics, aid to agriculture had steadily declined over the last three decades and gender-appropriate responses have dwindled. This paper asks: why can't global institutions get it right? Drawing on lessons from agricultural interventions addressing women's rights and gender equality, recent evaluations of multilateral agencies including FAO and IFAD, as well as new insights from complexity theory and institutional practice, this paper suggests that the answer lies partly in the fundamental contradiction between the task at hand and the nature of bureaucratic response(1).

My own work over the past 30 years has aimed to build knowledge on gender equality and institutional change and forge feminist organizational practices in development and human rights agencies. The evolution of my analysis and practice has its roots in various engagements working at multiple levels - from global level advocacy initiatives including on gender equality and UN reform and gender and democratic governance, evaluations of gender mainstreaming in large bilateral and multilateral development agencies including FAO and SDC, institutional change efforts in national NGOs (such as BRAC in Bangladesh) and international civil society organizations, research on human rights and institutional change, public sector reform, implementing gender equality policies and practices in private sector companies, to grassroots engagements with rural poor women. Through Gender at Work, an organization I co-founded, I have engaged with colleagues around the world in pioneering new approaches to institutional learning through action learning with multiple partners in India and countries in Eastern and Southern Africa, and as Board Chair of the Association of Women's Rights in Development and CIVICUS – World Alliance of Citizen Participation, I have worked for the implementation of these approaches in women's organizations and other development institutions.

Women's Agricultural Livelihoods and Global Response

According to FAO, in 2003 about 2.6 billion people, or 41 per cent of the world's population, depended on agriculture, forestry, fishing or hunting for their livelihoods (FAOSTAT, 2006). FAO further estimates that worldwide women constitute 43 per cent of the agricultural labor force (FAO, 2011) and produce between 60-80 per cent of the world's food crops. Women's roles are varied: 'They work on their own plots and those of others; they work as unpaid or paid workers, employers and employees and as wage-laborers in both on-and off-farm enterprises' (Mehra and Rojas, 2008). The documentation of women's contribution to agricultural production is extensive starting with Ester Boserup, who first chronicled women's paid and unpaid labour in agriculture in the 1970s to this year's FAO flagship publication, State of Food and Agriculture on Women in Agriculture (FAO, 2011). Also, it is now commonly known that everywhere in the world, women face constraints that limit their capacity to contribute to agricultural production. They face discrimination in access to productive resources such as land and services such as extension; they face wage discrimination in rural labor markets; and they are also more likely to be in part-time, seasonal and/or low-paying jobs when engaged in wage

employment. Evidence shows that these factors not only affect their welfare and that of their families, but also impose a high cost on the economy. This is not a new story.

What is also not new is the decline in aid and public expenditure to agriculture in the past two decades and persistent failure of agricultural policies, programs and services in addressing women farmers' needs and interests. According to the ODI, aid to agriculture has stagnated or declined since the early 1980s. 'Official development assistance (ODA) to the sector decreased in real terms by nearly half between 1980 and 2005, despite an increase of 250% in total ODA commitments over the same period. The share of ODA to agriculture fell from about 17% in the early 1980s to a low of 3% in 2005. The share of agricultural expenditure in total government spending dropped from 11% in 1980 to about 7% in 2002' (Cabral, 2007). Moreover, a recent gender analysis of agriculture related development aid for the period 1978-2003 points out that the percentage of money committed to women/gender-related agricultural projects in 2002-2003 was 5.1 per cent of the total (Ransom and Bain, 2011). While this represents an increase from the 1978-79 figure of 0.2 per cent, it clearly shows that the commitment of international aid to women and gender equality has remained minuscule. Moreover, the study notes that this level of commitment declined at the end of the 1990s relative to all agricultural aid and that this 'occurred during the period in which we have seen an absolute and relative increase in the number of women engaged in agriculture' (Ransom and Bain, 2011).

While population grew rapidly in the 1980s, food production and agricultural incomes decreased in many African countries (FAO, 1995). In general, government allocations to agriculture declined as the global recession resulted in a renewed preoccupation with growth as opposed to equity concerns. In many countries, the diminishing capacity of agriculture to provide for household subsistence increased the workload shouldered by women as men withdrew their labor from agriculture. Women had to increasingly make up for the family's food deficit by working as casual hired labor on larger farms, or by starting up income generating activities in addition to continuing their farming activities as well as other household tasks. The situation of rural women remains characterized by overwork, low productivity, and little access to credit, land, training, and the use of rudimentary technology. (FAO, SOFA, 2011)

Large international development agencies have recognized women's roles in agriculture and have articulated solutions to address women farmers' needs. The 1982 World Development Report, 'Agriculture and Economic Development' recognized that women were primary food producers in many societies and that extension services were biased towards working with men and neglected the very important role of women in agricultural production (Holmes and Slater, 2007). The 2008 WDR, 'Agriculture for Development' also recognized that that while growth potential was emerging in the dynamic labour intensive high-value crop sector, for many, wage labour in agriculture was characterized by low wages, seasonal work, and difficult labour conditions for mostly unskilled workers. The report acknowledged that in many countries, it is women who make up the larger share of the workforce in agriculture – employment that is seasonal and casual, leading to lower wages and precarious livelihoods (Holmes and Slater,

2007). Most importantly, as pointed out by Holmes and Slater , the WDR 2008 states that ‘challenging gender inequality and investing in addressing the barriers which women face, even through interventions such as positive discrimination, will increase efficiency and productivity in the agricultural sector and thereby contribute towards growth and poverty reduction. The report presents a strong argument that women’s lack of rights over access to and ownership of assets has a negative impact on agricultural productivity. Rights are also critical for women’s bargaining power within the household, their broader economic opportunities, and their long-term security in case of divorce or death of family members.’ Thus, the knowledge about key levers of change in this field is also well known.

In recent years, the combined food, climate and financial crises led to a renewed call by feminist researchers and gender equality advocates to focus world attention on the roles women play in producing food and agricultural production. ‘Why is the World Waiting?’ ask Bunch and Mehra (2008), in the face of widespread hunger (which in 2005 was estimated at 862 million but which has now risen to 925 million,(2) and child deaths from hunger and malnutrition (estimated at 16 million annually in 2008). To them, as to many, the answer is obvious – ‘women help answer hunger in every way possible. They grow food, sell food, buy food, prepare food, and increasingly they are involved in agricultural businesses that help build the economies of many developing countries’ (Bunch and Mehra, 2008). The Millennium Development Goals (specifically Goal 1 on the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger) have also called attention once again to women’s roles in food production and agricultural development. The prescriptions on what needs to be done to support women’s roles in agriculture and food production are many – most call for attention to gender-appropriate responses and attention to the unique dimensions of women’s poverty and include such measures as ‘strengthening women’s rights to land and natural resources; increasing women’s access to and control of productive assets, extension services, credit, and markets; introducing irrigation or labor-saving technologies where water or labor constraints prevent women from expanding production; and strengthening women’s leadership and technical capacity’ (Quisumbing *et al.*, 2008).

Given the widespread awareness of the women farmers’ needs and documented evidence of the importance of supporting women’s roles in agriculture, a reasonable question to ask is: why can’t large development institutions deliver? Clearly political intransigence, patriarchal values that oppose challenges to male power and that devalue women’s roles have played a large part in this neglect. Drawing on lessons from agricultural interventions designed to address women’s rights and gender equality, recent evaluations of multilateral organizations including IFAD and FAO, as well as insights from working with complexity theory and institutional practice, we suggest, as well, that a fundamental contradiction between the complexity of the task at hand and routinization of bureaucratic processes results in non-action or inadequate responses.

The path of many international development agencies in response to women’s rights and gender equality concerns over the past three decades has commonly included initial support to separate small women’s projects; followed by some investment in gender architecture inside the

institutions; and in the last decade, the adoption of a gender mainstreaming approach. Many recent agency gender evaluations have concluded that gender mainstreaming has had at best mixed success. To a large extent this has to do with the lack of '(i) results orientation; (ii) consistent leadership and follow-up by senior management and executive boards; (iii) staff and management incentives and accountability through performance management systems; (iv) a clear understanding of how best to address gender inequality; (v) adequate investment in gender equality expertise in operations; (vi) attention to gender balance in staffing; and (vii) an inclusive organizational culture' (IFAD, 2010). We have commented elsewhere on the tendency of gender mainstreaming to get lost in bureaucratic black holes and the myriad, insidious ways in which the mainstream resists women's perspectives and women's rights – from economic policy to governance and institutional change (Rao and Kelleher, 2005).

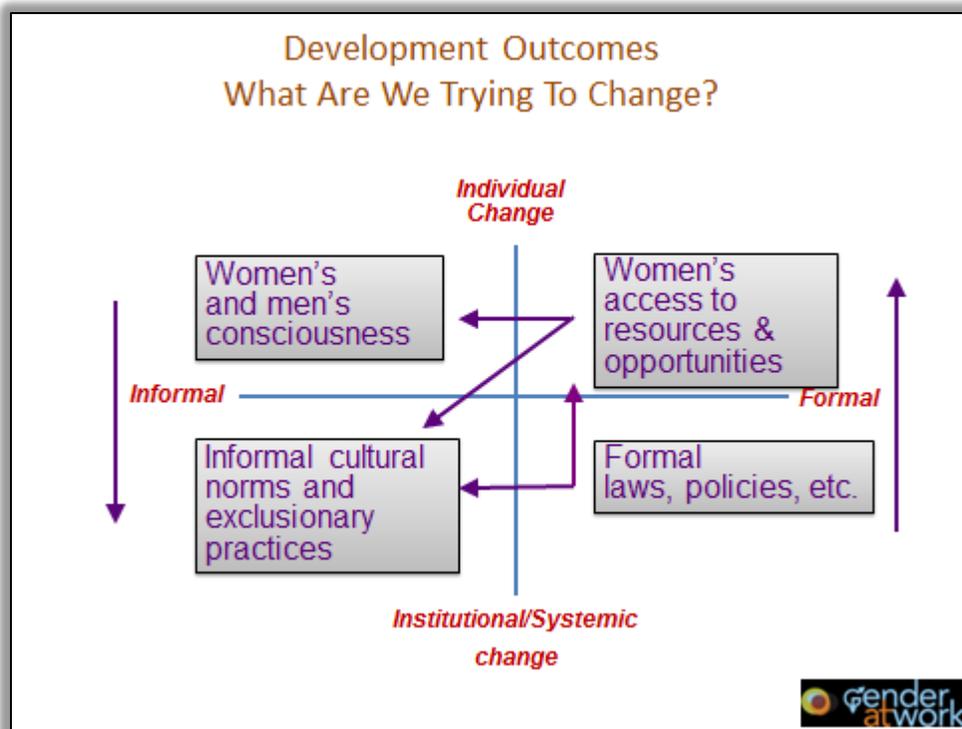
As important for quality of results is how development practice takes shape on the ground – in other words, how the 'what' gets implemented when the rubber hits the road. Even in a context of legal provisions of equality and reasonably good and democratic governance, important gender biases persist in the context of service delivery. Agricultural extension agents may completely ignore the needs of women farmers for training, for subsidized agricultural inputs, or for information about emerging markets. Police may sexually harass women when they come to police stations to register cases of rape or domestic violence. Judges and lawyers may refuse to recognize abuses of women's rights as crimes worthy of the attention of the legal system. School teachers may get away with sexually abusing girls, yet pregnant girls are forced to quit school. These abuses and power imbalances continue unchecked partly because women's movements do not yet in many contexts have the power or 'voice' to insist that politicians address these issues and hold public agents to account. But they also continue because there are gender biases in the way governance systems and development organizations operate.

Looked at from the point of view of rural women, what is needed is holistic change because the absence of equality in one aspect of women's lives puts other aspects at risk (Sen, 2006). Rural women's lives are complex and multidimensional and are affected by a range of forces - local, regional, national and international. Financial policies that promote fiscal austerity in government spending in social sectors are likely to impact education and health services that poor women need. Wage disparities in agricultural rates maintained by governments and the private sector make it difficult for women to translate jobs into economic empowerment. Trade policies that favor export-oriented agriculture to the detriment of the development of domestic markets may decrease investments in infrastructure and women's access to markets. Discriminatory laws and practices that promote early marriage for girls and limits to their education, domestic violence and lack of control over household resources negatively affect efforts to increase women's voice and representation in rural institutions (Hill, 2011). Therefore, it is unsurprising that where gender mainstreaming in projects has resulted in gains for women it has combined changes in: access to resources such as an income with changes in gender relations between women and men in a way that gives women greater recognition for their

contribution, higher status in the household and more say in decisions; combined participatory and respectful approaches with a proactive approach to change; built links to competent local institutions and resources that support women’s empowerment and gender equality; employed staff with expertise in women’s empowerment with management providing the support to apply their knowledge and skills (IFAD, 2010).

These findings fit well with the inter-relatedness of dimensions of change as shown in the Gender at Work framework, which is based on an analysis of the role of social institutions – both formal and informal – in maintaining and reproducing women's unequal position in society (Rao and Kelleher, 2005). This framework suggests that to bring about gender equality, changes be made in four inter-related domains as depicted in Figure 1 below (3). These include changes in measurable individual conditions (resources, voice, freedom from violence, access to health) and individual consciousness (knowledge, skills, political consciousness and commitment to change toward equality), as well as systemic changes in formal institutional rules (for instance, as laid down in constitutions, laws and policies) and the informal norms and cultural practices that maintain inequality in everyday life.

Figure 1: Development Outcomes: What Are We Trying to Change?



Central to the process of change is addressing the inter-relatedness of the change dynamic and changing relations of power – this means changing formal and informal rules that determine, who does what, who gets what, what counts, and who decides. To change systems of power, relationships between people, institutions and organizations have to shift. This means the state must create an opportunity structure which provides legislative and constitutional guarantees of rights (such as freedom from violence, equality before the law, marriage and inheritance rights), mechanisms of inclusion in social, economic and political life (such as access to land, affordable health care) as well as processes by which these mechanisms are enacted (Holland and Brook, 2004). But the creation of an opportunity structure alone does not guarantee access and use. Change also depends on women’s mobilization and empowerment. Social change requires that women mobilize, build their resources as movements and use these movements to claim their rights. Through mobilizing they strengthen their influence over institutions and hold them to account ensuring equity. However, neither the workings of an opportunity structure created by the state nor women’s mobilization occur in a vacuum. Both are influenced by contextual factors, chief of which are the formal organizations that ostensibly aim to help in the realization of rights (civil society organizations, political parties and trade unions) and the cultural dynamics that exist at both national and local levels. But do these bodies function in ways that support women’s rights and empowerment? (Rao and Kelleher, 2005) Development institutions, even if they wanted to, cannot carry out this task alone. Partnering with local organizations that have nuanced, contextual knowledge and women’s rights organizations and movements that help to create the political space for strategies and action that can result in positive outcomes for women are critical for success.

Over and over again, we have seen that neutrality on the part of government institutions, development agencies and civil society organizations ends up having a negative effect on women if women’s organizations and other civil society organizations don’t intervene to ensure that rights translate into reality. A recent study on land titling in Peru shows what it takes to make this happen – that is, to actually help women access resources and exercise their rights. This study highlights how Flora Tristan (a national women’s organization in Peru) worked closely with community based organizations of indigenous peoples *and* the implementing agents of the Special Land Titling and Cadastre Project (PETT) (Glavin, 2011). Flora Tristan devised a multipronged strategy to address not only access to resources but also the conditions shaping women access including the mindsets of both women and men shaped by ‘*machismo*’. Flora Tristan carried out campaigns to educate women and men about women’s rights and help women get identity papers so that they would be eligible for land titles, and they also worked with the PETT employees to make sure the project was implemented without any discrimination. They collaborated with local organizations to inform the technicians in the field, who were doing the land registration, helped them to reflect on their way of thinking, and on how what they did impacted the women.

‘One of the important strategies was to go with the PETT officials into the field and give information to the peasants, and in this way reach both the technicians and the peasants at the same time. The main goals were to identify the problems that the women of Cajamarca would face in the formalization process, inform the women about their rights, and come up with and promote suggestions on how to improve the situation/rights for women. Flora Tristan assisted the local organizations with courses, workshops and information... In Cusco, CSOs worked with PETT officials with empowerment, gender-sensitivity training, and accompanying the technicians into the field. ... The local CSOs held workshops and meetings, and collaborated with other civil society organizations. The goal was to create awareness of the problems, and put women’s rights on the agenda of neutral civil society organizations’.

Similarly, a much publicized national employment guarantee scheme in India works well for women when local civil society organizations play an educational and support role vis-à-vis rural women participants and a watch dog in relation to the program implementation(4). While in theory the scheme is meant to reserve 33 per cent of its projects for women, and provide amenities at the worksite (such as crèches and drinking water) that make it possible for women to participate, in practice the scheme inadequately meets women’s (especially Dalit women’s) income earning needs as well as their right of access to public lands and other public resources. While state implementation authorities as well as NGOs contracted by them carry out social audits of the program, these are generally gender-blind. Gender at Work’s efforts carried out in collaboration with local NGOs and CBOs including Dalit women’s organizations in Uttar Pradesh profile how important it is to specifically intervene to make these processes more gender sensitive, work to ensure that the program delivers to women as it is meant to, and collectively attempt to make Dalit women’s opinions heard at the program, state and national level on this program and broader right to food issues.

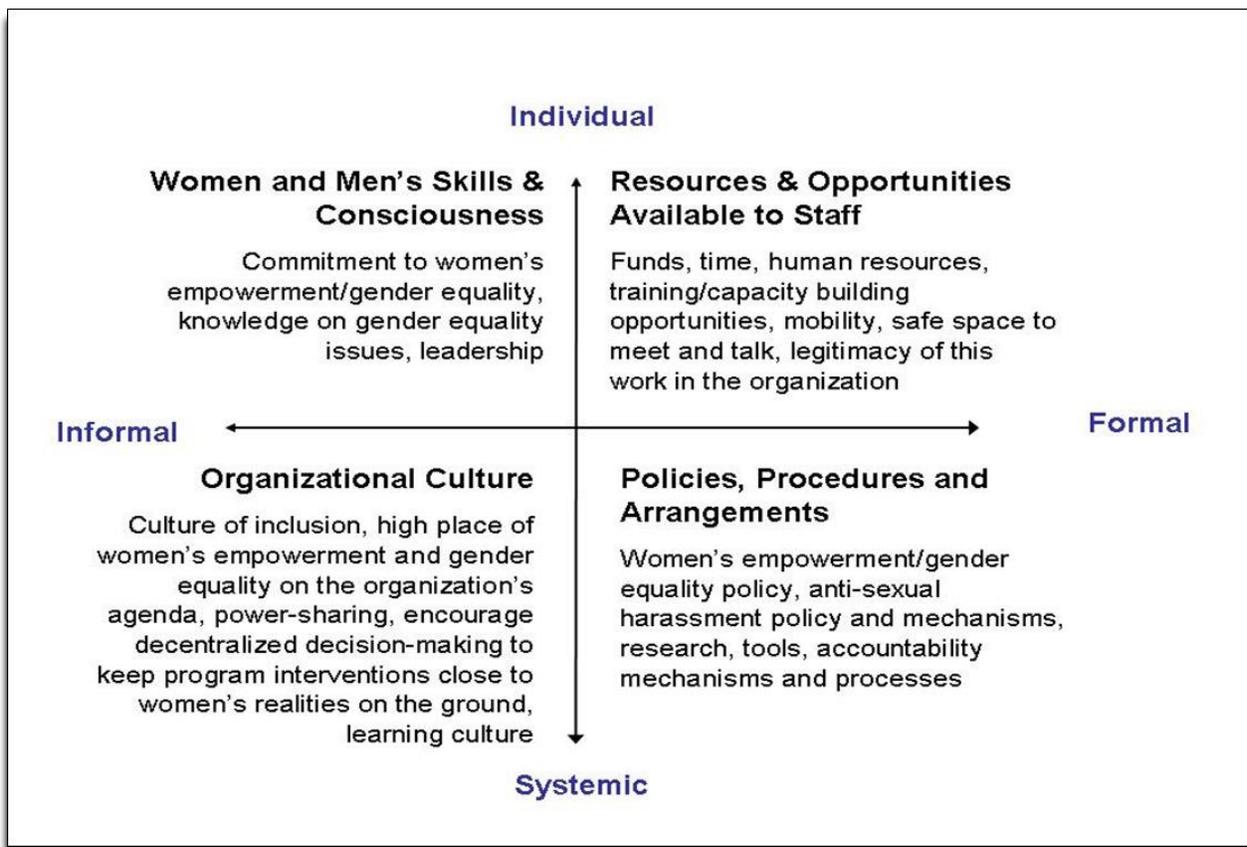
Because formal organizations are socially embedded, they reflect and reproduce existing power imbalances. So, while formal rules may specify non-discrimination in serving a population, organizations often operate according to values and rules that may be hidden – ‘rules in use’ which marginalize the interests of certain groups such as the poor or women. But more than that, ‘dysfunctional institutions do not just fail to deliver services. They disempower – and even silence – the poor through patterns of humiliation, exclusion, and corruption’ (Narayan-Parker, 2002). For poor women, socio-cultural institutions such as the household have proved particularly discriminatory sites.

Thus, as shown in Figure 2 below, for an organization to be an effective agent of change in one or more of the change domains discussed above, it too must have certain capabilities and cultural attributes (such as a particular type of leadership, accountability to women clients, and a capacity for dialogue and conflict resolution) that have both individual and systemic, formal and informal dimensions that mirror the change dimensions above:

- Individual/informal: personal skills and consciousness, commitment and leadership.
- Individual/formal: resources and opportunities available to staff.
- Systemic/formal: organizational policies and procedures, ways of working and accountability mechanisms.
- Systemic/Informal: deep structure and organizational culture.

Change in one domain is related to change in the others but the hardest to change are discriminatory norms and values that maintain and reproduce exclusionary practices. Because these exclusionary norms are embedded in informal institutions such as kinship, family and community -- or what Kabeer calls 'parallel traditions of belonging' (Kabeer, 2002) -- which involve norms of reciprocity, they carry over into other arenas. This means that because of these connections, women themselves will hesitate to demand modern constitutional rights as this would challenge community norms. Yet, the struggle for their community's interest usually implies acceptance of their ascribed subordinate status (Goetz, 2003).

Figure 2: Organizational Features that facilitate Gender Equality



Mainstream organizations of all kinds ranging from development agencies to trade unions or NGOs have been far less effective as we might have hoped in championing women's rights. This has less to do with their formal policies but more to do with what they actually prioritize and why. For example, particular aspects of political parties can support or block women's participation (Goetz and Hassim, 2003) and the 'deep structure' of organizations (Rao and Kelleher, 2002) can operate to block women's involvement in them as well as prevent them from functioning effectively to challenge gendered power relations. As a result, many organizations that ostensibly serve an equality and justice agenda don't walk the talk enough in sharing power and democracy within their own organizations. Most often this question gets pushed aside in battles to defend spaces in hostile environments or a focus on institutional outputs and is only tangentially addressed in concerns about 'second-generation leadership' and 'diversity' initiatives. This is even worse in many organizations dealing with agriculture and rural development, since they are largely oriented towards a technocratic delivery model of goods and extension services, and do not consider an equality and justice agenda to be directly relevant to their functions.

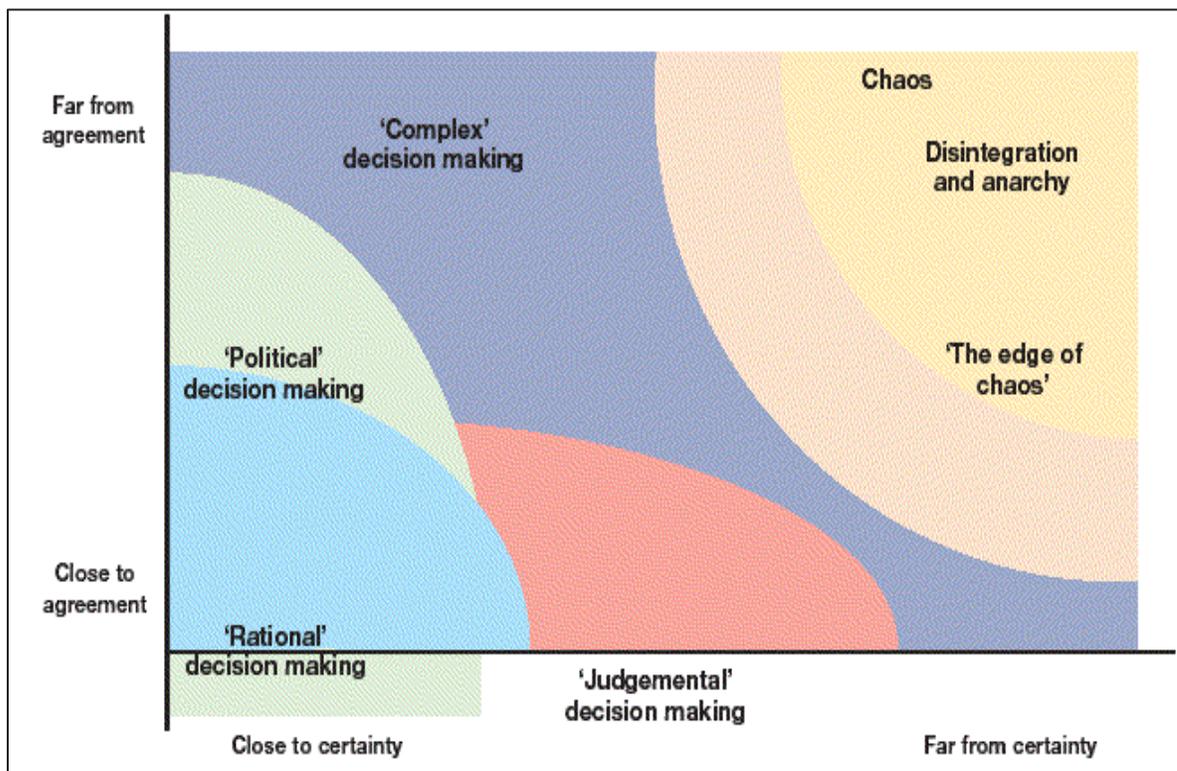
A key aspect of democratizing power is accountability. For most organizations, accountability means legal and fiscal accountability and it means accountability to the top both within organizations – to the top management – or outside for example, donors. Commonly, we understand that there are two dimensions of accountability – answerability and enforceability. Answerability means that power-holders are obliged to explain or justify their actions. Enforceability refers to sanctions that can be applied when illegal actions have taken place. Goetz suggests that accountability systems are shorthand about how power works in any system. They tell us who has to answer to whom and who can punish somebody for making a bad decision. So, if we use this lens of accountability, what would gender positive institutional change mean? It would mean that power holders answer to women and a feminist constituency. The questions one would ask would include: Are there mechanisms for a feminist constituency to raise its interests? Can it trigger punishment (such as an investigation, legal action)? What are the specific types of gender accountability failures in different institutional arenas? Are women's voices not reflected? A system-wide approach to accountability also will make it possible to assess progress and gaps at all levels of the organization's work on gender equality both in policy decision making and program implementation.

Partnerships with women's organizations and movements can be key to accountability but equally important is how development agencies and civil society organizations and actors work at the local level with women. We know that gender issues are complex in that they involve multiple interrelated variables that are not easily amenable to quick fixes. Understanding what strategies work in such contexts is quite different from what works in simple systems where a sequence of known steps produces expected results. In recent years, complexity science has elucidated aspects of living systems that are not addressed or are understated in traditional science which builds on a Newtonian cause-and-effect linear world view in which the dominant

metaphor is a machine and the whole is the sum of the parts. In such a worldview, the whole is predictable and the parts don't have choice or self-determination. Newtonian science underpins economics, management theory and physics, but as complexity theorists have pointed out, it does not explain human behavior. 'For example, when a natural disaster strikes a community, we have seen spontaneous organization where there is no obvious leader, controller or designer. In these contexts, we find groups of people create outcomes and have impacts which are far greater than would have been predicted by summing up the resources and skills available within the group. In these cases, there is self-organization in which outcomes emerge which are highly dependent on the relationships and context rather than merely the parts' (Zimmerman, et.al 1998). In contrast, complexity science suggests that the whole is not the sum of the parts but rather that emergent properties of the whole are inexplicable by the parts. In complexity, studies of natural and human systems are explained by both kinds of analysis - micro (or analysis of the parts) and macro (or holistic analysis).

According to Zimmerman, the Stacey Matrix (Figure 3) is a useful map for navigating the field of complexity. It can help to select appropriate management action (and development interventions) in a complex adaptive system based on the degree of certainty and level of agreement on the issue in question.

Figure3: Ralph Stacey's Agreement & Certainty Matrix



For issues on which there is agreement and certainty, intervention models are straight forward and at the outer boundaries of disagreement and great uncertainty, problems and solutions are unclear. In between these two, lie complicated social change issues that have multiple interrelated variables – such as issues of including gender equality. In this zone of complexity, where much development work takes place, experimentation and learning rather than blanket approaches will likely yield successful strategies (Zimmerman, 2007).

Such contexts pose particular problems for development bureaucracies. Bureaucracies are hierarchical structures built around sectoral and programmatic silos, where decision-making power is concentrated at the top. To a large extent such bureaucracies are more comfortable in defining problems and solutions in technical terms – for example, if a country wants to increase its crop yields, FAO can provide tools and techniques; if a country shifts from state to private land ownership, FAO can provide legal advice. This approach has perpetuated a hierarchy in which products are prioritized over people and technical skills are prioritized above social analytical skills. So, while the SOFA 2011 itself acknowledges that the gender gap in access to assets is largely dictated by discriminatory social norms that extend to all dimensions of agriculture it has little to say about changing gender relations and discriminatory practices (FAO Gender Evaluation, 2011). Moreover, development bureaucracies rarely create and sustain spaces for collective reflection and learning which is at the heart of working with complexity. Development bureaucracies and government departments are hierarchical structures built around sectoral and programmatic silos, where decision-making power is concentrated at the top and where gender equality is one of many priorities at the bottom of the organizational totem pole.

The fundamental contradiction we face is that as Standing points out, ‘bureaucracies are not engines of social and political transformation’ and ‘the main myth in gender mainstreaming ... is a mythic relocation of the possibility of political transformation to an inherently non-transformatory context’ (Standing, 2004). Yet, the messy business of changing unequal gender relations is at the heart of women’s empowerment and gender equality work. Anyone who has spent time in large organizations knows that things get done by developing good personal relationships and informal connections with key decision makers and organizational ‘doers’ from program officers to human resource personnel. But this is not the public face of development bureaucracies and not what they would own up to. Bureaucracies in the Weberian mode have staff as the ‘hands’ delivering what the ‘head’ decides, and controls to ensure standardization of delivery. Routinization of certain practices could benefit women by systematically incorporating attention to distributional impacts of development interventions. But this had not happened. Gender differences in terms of access to benefits and consideration of potential adverse impacts; consultation processes sensitive to the different needs of men and women; and gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation systems are all essential elements in policy interventions but they are largely absent in institutional responses to women in agriculture.

Further, the standard operating procedures of bureaucratic practice are ineffective in addressing the complex nature of gender equality work (and, indeed, development work in general) which requires improvisation, and spaces for collective action and learning (Pasteur, 2006). Innovation, which is a step further is characterized less by ‘eureka’ moments according to Johnson (2010) than by the collision of small hunches – this requires systems that can allow connectivity to happen.

Are there any good practices we can look to? There are such ‘seeds of change’, that may or may not end up as ‘forests of transformation’ (Hill, 2011) which invest in holistic change approaches and build relationships of trust with rural women including indigenous communities, that we can examine. They show that investment in rural women can have positive impacts for women, communities, countries and international cooperation especially when they have the following characteristics: ‘[they are] based on long-term structural processes and not on projects; apply the human rights approach to facilitate the creation of spaces for intergenerational dialogue; apply a holistic integral approach; respect and apply local and traditional knowledge, including language, spiritual and productive practices; build a trusting and a horizontal relationship with the target population; target resources (human, technical and financial) to the areas; and enhance and develop institutional capacities of local, self-governing institutions, including indigenous peoples’ (Cunningham Kain, 2011). In its work with indigenous peoples over the last decade, IFAD has valued and leveraged ‘the diversity of indigenous peoples, as an asset and potential factor for economic development’ and ‘also acknowledges that when these resources are not recognized and not taken into account through specific approaches which respect their values and build upon their strengths, the projects have had limited effectiveness’. IFAD has used participatory approaches in the design and implementation of programs with indigenous peoples; strengthened their rights over natural resources; strengthened local government institutions and combined indigenous knowledge with modern technology.

As mentioned earlier, changing discriminatory norms and values is the hardest task in work on gender equality. For more than fifteen years, Gender at Work (5) has focused on this issue and worked with civil society organizations to address women’s rights, gender equality and social justice. ‘Gender at Work provides a series of reflective spaces that allow individuals and organizations to inquire deeply into their work for gender equality, explore how they are framing the way they think about gender equality (triple loop learning), and plan and implement high-leverage action’ (Friedman and Gordezky, 2010). It uses an action learning approach to enable organizations to discover their own trajectory of change and to work with change on their own terms. This creates a sense of ownership which is critical for work on gender equality because it is deeply embedded in cultural norms and assumptions that perpetuate practices of exclusion and social inequalities, including that of gender inequality. The Gender at Work Framework (referenced above) ‘helps to disrupt existing discriminatory practices by asking participants to explore the interior and exterior personal, social, political and cultural domains. In doing so, they experiment with new possibilities, possibilities they could not even imagine with any hope of

change. Through action learning, participants become more open to co-creation of new cultural norms and traditions that value difference, inclusivity, equality, connection and respect. As partners in learning and action, participants surface into awareness the unconscious perceptions and habits that support unequal prejudicial behavior at personal, organizational and community levels. Finally, integrating the mind, body and spirit with playfulness and creative expression enables more inclusive ways of seeing and being' (Friedman and Gordezky, 2010).

This kind of approach which devolves ownership and builds partnerships of trust is echoed in some of the most up-to-date and thoughtful management thinking on integrative risk management and resilient organizations which tells us that in cases of complexity and in the face of multiple crises, post-disaster situations and complex system failures, what works least well are centralized command and control structures and what works best is 'decentralized intelligent adaptation' (Howitt and Leonard, 2010). This essentially means we need to support locally driven assessment and engagement and community discussion on what to do and how to fix things; discretionary resources to try out ideas because solutions are not known in advance; and supporting and trusting local organizations to carry out the work. For addressing gender equality issues in agriculture and sustainable development this would require large development agencies to build and resource an opportunity structure that can facilitate local level problem solving, capacity building and innovation. But that is not enough. Without a value frame or a set of principles driving such work, a management system that provides incentives and requires accountability for results, and a system of aggregating learning so that successes can be adapted and replicated, we would simply have a set of interesting experiments. Information is a key source of change as it facilitates the ability and potential for the organization to adapt to its environment and to act and react. However, we need to have agreement on what we are trying to accomplish and the values by which we are operating. Operating within such a frame, rather than a 500 page book of 'policy guidelines' or 'checklists' (6) will free people up to find contextually specific, gender equality approaches that address both women's needs for tangible resources and services and also have the potential to ship away at discriminatory norms and values that maintain and reproduce exclusionary practices.

While this thinking is being applied to modern public sector management, it has not yet been applied to UN agencies, (or not to agriculture and food security) and definitely not to gender equality and agriculture. Instead, we are left trying to reform nineteenth century institutions in a twenty-first century world. Given the current global contexts of financial insecurity, rising food prices and subsequent insecurity, using what we know to be good practice is an opportunity that is too important to be missed.

We began our analysis from the proposition that there is a fundamental contradiction between the task at hand and the nature of bureaucratic response. Centralized and routinized bureaucratic responses poorly address the multidimensional nature of women's poverty and gender inequality. The Gender at Work framework is useful in focusing our attention on the need for simultaneous change in the organizational structure of delivery, and the strengthening of women's

empowerment, capacity and ability to hold institutions accountable. For this to happen global institutions need to focus on challenging the basis of women's disempowerment and systematically connect to women's organizations and other civil society organizations at national and local levels that promote women's human rights. For women to know and claim their rights, they must be involved in program definition, which also involves freeing time and space for their participation. Since resistance to these changes can be powerful, strategic choices need to be made about how to build alliances for this work; and a participative design process is necessary that identifies opportunities, puts in place necessary resources and infrastructure and works closely on implementation on the ground.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Rieky Stuart for her insights and comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2 <http://www.worldhunger.org>

3 This framework is an adaptation of the work of Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything*, Boston: Shambala, 2000

4 The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005 aims to provide enhanced livelihood security, giving at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members seek unskilled manual work.

5 Gender at Work is an international collaborative that strengthens organizations to build cultures of equality and social justice, with a particular focus on gender equality. (www.genderatwork.org)

6 See the discussion on minimum specifications (minspecs) in Zimmerman et. al 1998.

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