



Learning from the South: challenging the balance of power and knowledge in small-scale farming systems

Lindsay Stringer & Chasca Twyman

University of Sheffield





Outline

- Background to the project
- Academic context
- Challenging the power balance
- Biophysical stresses
- Socio-political and economic stresses
- The way forward





Background

- RELU Development Activity
- Challenges deterministic assumptions of north-south aid and knowledge flows
- 2-day Workshop held in Feb 2005
- Attended by UK & European researchers, NGOs, farmers, policymakers, United Nations
- Common issues, common solutions?





Academic context

- Grounded in theory of post-normal science
- Incorporated a diversity of world views legitimating a plurality of perspectives
- Facilitates collaborative learning across disciplinary, institutional and spatial boundaries
- New and creative ways of thinking about problems faced by small-scale farmers that challenge the balance of power and knowledge?





Biophysical stresses

- Differences in climate, topography and extent of landscape change N & S
- But N & S, biophysical stresses such as drought lead to other stresses (soil erosion, land degradation, poverty, decreased productivity, declining biodiversity etc)
- Climate change/variability is the primary driver
- Biophysical stresses considered to most impact southern countries...draws on a number of assumptions of how we construct 'stress'





Biophysical stresses

- 'Capitals approach' is useful in determining capacity to respond to biophysical stresses
- Southern responses include:
 - Migration
 - Water harvesting strategies
 - Reliance on social networks
 - Diversification of crop production
 - Farmer-farmer learning
 - Seed saving
 - Cost-cutting
 - Livelihood diversification or specialisation
 - Crop rotation





Biophysical stresses

- Northern responses are more closely tied to the availability, accessibility and translatability of financial capital
- This in turn affects differences in understandings N & S of what constitutes 'stress'





Socio-economic and political stresses

- Common ground N & S: disempowerment and marginalisation of small-scale farmers
- Key issues N & S include:
 - Poverty
 - Social exclusion & isolation
 - Low levels of development in rural areas
 - Limited access to markets
 - Policy context
 - Changing characteristics of rural populations





Common causes?

- Globalisation processes: farmers N & S are the weakest players in the food supply chain
- Production costs $>$ consumption costs
- Profit bottleneck between producers and consumers...benefits the already powerful





A question of scale

- Responses to socio-political & economic stresses occur at a number of scales:
 - Individual
 - Household
 - Community
 - National
 - International

Can be formal or informal, long-term or short-term





Northern household level responses

- Livelihood diversification or specialisation
- Migration
- Reduction of farm size through sale of land
- Reduction of expenditure on farm enterprise inputs & minimisation of expenditure on personal consumption
- Decreased use of paid labour & associated increased reliance upon unpaid labour





Southern household level responses

- Reliance on social capital and social networks
- Livelihood diversification or specialisation
- Migration
- Reduction of expenditure on farm enterprise inputs & minimisation of expenditure on personal consumption





Northern collective responses

- Membership of farmers' unions
- Farmer protests (e.g. France)
- Sales at farmers' markets
- Lobbying of MPs and supermarkets
- Dialogue with DEFRA and policymakers





Southern collective responses

- Calls for greater democratisation and changes to governance
- Working with NGOs – partnership is key
- Membership of fair trade organisations





Is there a case for learning from the south?

- Many areas of common ground N & S
- Different responses which could be transferred
- Transfer possible in both directions...challenges power relations rather than just reversing the dichotomy
- Leads to questions of:
 - How can experiences and coping strategies be transferred?
 - At what level should this occur?





Sharing experiences of workshop participants

- Farmer visits e.g. Oxfam America
- International Conventions to directly address small-scale agriculture issues and knowledge transfer
- Farmer conferences, linking participants N & S
- Agro-ecology project approaches, linking knowledges N & S
- Developing a diversity of levels at which experience sharing can take place (project based learning: NGO-farmer, NGO-NGO learning, farmer-farmer)
- Furthering understanding of communication channels within and between different groups N & S





The way forward?

- Focus should centre on process-based rather than place-based responses
- Need to question:
 - Whether we want to maintain small-scale farming given that it is not always the optimum strategy
 - Need to challenge the 'cheap food' mentality that has persisted





Conclusion

- There is potentially a case for 'learning from the south'
- Further research is needed into how this might be best carried out
- Workshop outcomes very positive
- Outputs: project report, proposed online discussion forum, social network of workshop participants

