Intersectionality and Power: the everyday notions, politics and dynamics of organizing around vanilla for smallholder farmers in the value chain.

ABSTRACT

Despite the conceptual debates around the concept, a so-called ‘sustainability turn’ has taken place over the last decade. This has led to a renewed interest in the human dimension of Sustainability and the means of building robust social perspectives into sustainability research. Using the case of smallholder farmers in vanilla value chain of Madagascar the larger research project „Diversity Turn“ in Land Use Science, in which this work is embedded, takes on this task.

Agriculture Value chains are believed to have transformative potential for rural communities. It promises better market integration, sustainable use of land and escape from poverty. However, these positive benefits are not automatic, given that value chains also carry with them major equity issues, and distributional effects. The well documented disparities between men and women in agriculture has led to a focus on gender value chain analysis. While this has led to exposing gender inequality in value chains, its focus is narrow. If social sustainability, from a development perspective, means the provision of basic needs, equity and social justice, then power relations and power dynamics analysis becomes central to exploring the social in sustainability research. Therefore, instead of keeping equity issue in the background as in the case of gender analysis, a shift of focus from specific social categories (e.g. gender) to the nature of relations between groups, draws equity and power relation issues to the foreground and makes them the focus of the analyses. This approach is important for capturing the nuances of interactions which underpins oppression at micro, mezzo and macro levels of society. However, this kind of focus on power relations in value chain analysis remains rare.
This study contributes to closing this gap. It explores the complex power processes and relations by which marginalization is produced, reproduced, maintained and redressed among small holder farmers in the vanilla value chain of Northeastern Madagascar. I first question whether the current ‘modus operandi’ in the value chain influence power relation between and among actor groups.

In this study, I use Constructive Grounded Theory and take into account, on the one hand, the methodological imperatives of doing Sustainability Research, and on the other, the moral and practical implications of doing power relations research. The study seeks to enrich the theoretical understanding of the complex power processes and relations by which marginalization is produced, reproduced, maintained and redressed within potentially transformative agriculture value chains. By merging feminist theoretical and methodological perspectives of intersectionality and grounded theory with sustainability research, the study seeks to advance a broader conceptualization of intersectionality. An intersectional perspective that shifts focus from identifying social categories to a qualitative investigation of the nature of relations between and among social categories. On the practice front, the study provides a space for dialogue and reflections among the marginalized, about their position in the value chain; how they contribute to the maintenance of their marginalization and their options for redress.