

Beyond a token effort: Gender transformative climate change action in the Pacific

Anna Gero, Keren Winterford and Tamara Megaw, University of Technology Sydney and Emmanuella Kauhue and Tukatara Tangi, Plan International, Australia

Introduction

Gender inequality, unequal power relations and discrimination are barriers that often prevent women, girls and people of diverse sexual and gender identities from equal representation and participation in many aspects of society. Addressing these issues in climate change programming is crucial, given the ways in which climate change can amplify existing gender inequalities (CEDAW 2018). Pacific Island Countries (PICs) are already experiencing the impacts of climate change. Although the diverse cultures of the Pacific have adapted to severe weather over the millennia, the broad range and severity of climate change impacts require new interventions to ensure lives and access to basic rights are protected. All sectors and all levels of society—from local to national, rural to urban—require new ways of working to adapt to climate change. These new ways need to ensure that marginalised segments of society, including women, girls and boys, people of diverse sexual and gender identities, people with disability and indigenous people, are considered. ‘Gender transformative climate change action’ seeks to address some of these issues, by transforming underlying norms and behaviours, relations, systems and structures to ensure gender equality.

The Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney (ISF-UTS) led research in March-June 2018, commissioned by Plan International Australia (PIA) to support their global commitment to strengthen policy and programming objectives to be more gender transformative. ISF-UTS researchers worked alongside PIA’s Pacific-based programme managers and partner organisations in the Pacific to undertake this work. Their inputs, guidance, contextualisation and co-authorship on this paper helped ground the work in the context and experiences of Pacific Islanders.

This paper describes dimensions of gender transformative climate change action (GTCCA) in the Pacific. The next section outlines how the research was undertaken and is followed by examples of five dimensions of GTCCA. A conclusion provides a summary and suggested next steps to implement a GTCCA approach.

Research design and practice

The objective of the research was to define what gender transformative climate change action looks like and provide insights for programming in the Pacific and beyond. PIA’s strategy aims to have 90 per cent of its programs be gender transformative by 2019 (Plan International 2017; Plan International 2018). Gender transformative is defined as an approach to ‘actively reduce gender inequalities to enhance achievement of project goals’ (Vunisea et al 2015:13). The research built on this definition, exploring dimensions of

a gender transformative approach to programming and enablers of effective gender transformative climate change action.

Conceptual perspectives for the research were informed by Plan International policies and programming and also drew on literature in the broader development sector. A gender transformative approach emphasises how gender initiatives relate to power and social justice. Gender transformative change requires individual agency through raising awareness of power inequalities and opportunities, strengthening of relationships in the home and community, and organising to influence structural change in policies and institutions (Hillenbrand et al 2015). The research also considered how people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics experience social exclusion and vulnerability to climate change in particular.

Three aspects of climate change action were considered in the research: 1) climate change adaptation, including activities by Plan International’s local partner organisations; 2) climate change advocacy; and 3) climate justice, which recognises that those who are least responsible for the cause of climate change are those most at risk to its consequences.

The research methodology reflected a strengths-based approach, focussed on learning and transformation. Emphasis on qualitative methods of data collection revealed positive programming practices and lived experiences in the Pacific context. A modified version of appreciative inquiry was used to discover past success and their enablers, visions for preferred futures and actions to take as part of gender transformative climate change action. Learning and transformation was an important part of the research approach and aligned with feminist methodology. This approach intentionally privileges marginalised voices in the research and provides space and an audience for women’s knowledges, values and capabilities to be affirmed and to potentially have influence in local settings.

Research methods

The research used combined methods of document review (secondary data) and stakeholder interviews and participatory group processes (primary data). ISF-UTS researchers first reviewed documents from research, gender and climate change policy and programming approaches of Plan International and other development agencies implementing programmes in the Pacific and developed a synthesis that informed the focus of the case study research and research questions. The Solomon Islands and Fiji were selected as countries for in-depth learning where PIA are implementing climate change programmes with local partners. The two contrasting country contexts meant replicability of findings

could be tested between countries. In the Solomon Islands and Fiji, ISF-UTS researchers interviewed stakeholders from government, regional organisations and community-based organisations who had experience implementing climate change, environmental or gender-focussed programmes. ISF-UTS researchers conducted participatory group discussions in the Solomon Islands with facilitators from the Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) in Hulavu Village, West Guadalcanal Province, and in Fiji with facilitators from Partners in Community Development Fiji (PCDF) in Nasau Village, Ra Province.

To learn their experience of past programmes, women and men of various ages were engaged in village level research activities. This included questions about: the extent of participation of different community groups and individuals in climate change adaptation activities; changes and impacts of programming; and visions for future climate change adaptation programming. ISF-UTS researchers conducted thematic data analysis in relation to the research questions and comparative analysis to compare different perspectives and experiences of gender responsive climate change action.

Ethical research and limitations

Ethics was an important consideration at each stage of the research project. A standard ethics approval process was undertaken by the researchers through ISF-UTS. Informed consent was gained from all research participants. The feminist research methodology employed emphasises that the knowledge produced is a partial perspective (Haraway 1988), and historically and culturally situated. The researchers recognised their limitations in not being from PICs and encountering social privileges as ‘white outsiders’ to the research population. The partnerships with local organisations PCDF and SIDT were important to ensure research protocols were appropriate to the local context and staff were engaged in meetings following primary research to make sense of the research findings to capture nuanced meanings.

Inclusion of marginalised groups in the research was minimal due to the limited scope of the research. The timing of the research did not allow for in-depth engagement of children and youth, whose perspectives would have been valuable to the research. People living with disability and sexual and gender minorities were not included in the research in a targeted way, because at present PCDF and SIDT do not have a dedicated focus to identify and work with these individuals in the communities they work with. We aimed to overcome these limitations as much as possible through the use of secondary data.

Key dimensions for a GTCCA approach in the Pacific

Drawing on document review and consultations in Fiji and Solomon Islands with key stakeholders within civil society, government, donors and village level consultations with women and men, we have distilled the key dimensions for GTCCA in the Pacific into the following five points. The first describes the underlying principle that for change to be

sustainable, it must be embedded in the appropriate local context. The second dimension is to work with existing enabling organisations that are already working in any given context. Third, to recognise that change occurs across multiple dimensions. Fourth, to recognise that GTCCA is a complex process with uncertain outcomes and lastly, that inclusive legal frameworks can stimulate changes in norms and attitudes. These five dimensions are described in more detail below.

1. For gender transformative climate change action to be sustainable, it needs to be embedded in the local context

An underlying principle for all dimensions of the GTCCA approach is that change needs to be driven from within and informed by the local context. Local voices need to be demanding the change and be the drivers of relevant and appropriate actions that can be sustained. Local actors will understand the context in which they are operating in terms of culture, environment and politics. Local actors are also more likely to understand which pathways are likely to lead to more sustainable change, for example changes in laws and policies in relation to climate change and gender equality as prompts to changes in norms and attitudes (see key dimension five).

For any change to be transformative, it also needs to be inclusive of representation from the diverse interest groups it seeks to affect. The concept of ‘nothing about us, without us’—the motto used by the Pacific Disability Forum and other disability and marginalised groups worldwide, encapsulates the sentiment that to be effective, policy change needs to include the voices of those who are most affected by the policy, voices often excluded from debate. For GTCCA, this means including women, girls, people of diverse gender and sexual identities and people with disability. Inclusion of these voices will help to ensure changes are implemented in such a way that account for, and are embedded within, the local context—be it the cultural, environmental, social or economic landscape. The other dimensions described in this paper hinge on GTCCA being implemented in the appropriate local context.

2. Work with existing enabling organisations

Across the Pacific, there are a range of local gender-focussed and women’s non-government organisations, as well as climate change focussed NGOs already providing support and training to strengthen capacity, and advocate for issues including gender and climate change. Partnering with these existing NGOs helps bring together different skill sets and expertise, and will be essential to enact GTCCA. To ensure climate change projects are locally owned and are informed by the social context in which women in the Pacific live, agencies must meaningfully engage with local organisations, including women-led organisations (CARE 2017). These local organisations have pre-existing relationships with marginalised women and girls, as well as government, private sector and churches at the community level, while also having the appropriate expertise to include gender transformative activities in their programming.

Our research revealed several examples of gender and women focussed NGOs working to promote women's participation in climate change actions. In Fiji, this was particularly strong. For example, FemLINK Pacific is a feminist media organisation based in Fiji (but works in other PICs) focussed on overcoming the inequality of women's participation in decision-making. FemLINK programmes include Women's Weather Watch, which addresses women's exclusion from planning and coordination in times of disaster by providing early warning information on tropical cyclones through the media such as radio. Another example is Diverse Voices and Action (DIVA) for Equality in Fiji, which is an NGO active in advocating for greater gender and social inclusion, including within climate change action. DIVA for Equality was active in the Pacific Partnerships to Strengthen Gender, Climate Change Responses and Sustainable Development. In the Solomon Islands, Vois Blong Mere Solomon Islands is an NGO active in promoting women's education on climate change. Vois Blong Mere aims to provide the means for women across the Solomon Islands to connect with each other and produces two women's radio programmes with informative and empowering messages for women.

In addition to partnering with organisations with gender expertise, partnering with local and regional organisations with strong skills in climate change would enable a skills transfer and capacity building for local staff. Pacific organisations with climate change skills include the University of the South Pacific's Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development, Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, or NGOs such as the Pacific Islands Climate Action Network. Lane and McNaught (2009) also highlight the value of collaborative practice in the context of climate change action in the Pacific. Such an approach, which brings together communities, meteorological services, development practitioners and other experts, enhances a shared understanding of climate change risks as well as broadening the spectrum of options for adaptation.

3. Change occurs across multiple dimensions and sectors

Gender transformative change occurs across multiple dimensions (from individual to institutional); levels (from local to international); and all sectors (for example, education, infrastructure and agriculture). Gender transformative change operates at the individual level with changes to consciousness, self-esteem and empowerment, and equitable access to resources and opportunities; as well as at an institutional and systemic level with changes to cultural norms and practices, and formal laws and policies (Rao and Kelleher 2005).

Interventions for gender transformative approaches target multiple actors and institutions including household, community groups, organisations, private sector, subdistrict government, and national government. A broad approach to change connected across multiple dimensions, levels and scales is critical to extending gender-focussed programming to be gender transformative. Similarly, tackling the challenges of climate change also requires working across these multiple dimensions—and for both gender and

climate change, transformation across these dimensions needs to be connected.

Gender transformative climate change action involves multiple entry points for inclusive and active participation. Meaningful participation of marginalised groups in decision-making and action must be prioritised. Strengthening participation of different groups within communities and building relations with other private sector and government stakeholders is complementary for influencing transformative change. The research identified the need for both women-only spaces for women's dialogue and empowerment, and spaces for collaboration of women and men together. For example, women, as a traditionally excluded group, benefit from their own spaces for dialogue to increase their knowledge about climate change and adaptation options. This knowledge enables them to contribute to community-wide climate change action in assessment, design and decision-making and be valued for their contribution. Women's spaces also provide a safe place to build their individual confidence and express their perspectives, recognising in many contexts they have been excluded from decision-making roles. For example, separate focus groups for men and women on issues around the gendered impacts of climate change allow differences in perceptions of risk to emerge and be discussed. Furthermore, maintaining these separate spaces accounts for the cultural norms which often present barriers to women speaking up in front of men, thus allowing them space to speak freely on issues relevant to them (Lane and McNaught 2009).

Part of promoting a GTCCA approach involves empowering women in women-only spaces, however, GTCCA also requires such practice to occur in tandem with women and men working collaboratively for climate change action. The women and men 'side-by-side' approach involves men valuing the contributions of women and the shared benefits this brings for the community. Men's engagement in programming will increase men's acceptance of the changed and more empowered role of women in building resilience to climate change (CARE 2017). Stakeholders interviewed for the research recognised the unique knowledge of women about climate change based on their gendered roles and responsibilities. Building from local cultural contexts, engaging women and men together strengthens relationships in community life and creates collective commitment for gender equality in climate change programming (Lane and McNaught 2009). It is also important to recognise that this process alters the balance of power, and there is potential for heightened risks to women of gender-based violence, thus monitoring mechanisms are required to measure both positive and any adverse consequences (Hillenbrand et al 2015).

Other groups who experience exclusion, such as sexual and gender minorities and people living with disability, also benefit from their own spaces to increase their knowledge about climate change and build self-confidence and solidarity. Supporting these spaces for dialogue, and thus supporting a GTCCA approach, should be combined with equal opportunities to participate in trainings, public forums and decision-making regarding climate change action. Inclusive participation between diverse groups in society

and with government, community-based organisations and private sector—and importantly, connections to other actors and institutions—contributes to leveraging change for gender transformative outcomes.

A key dimension that supports a GTCCA approach is that it occurs across spatial scales—from local to international. In international policy, the gender dimensions of climate change have been recognised in the Gender Action Plan, approved during the United Nations Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties 23 (2017). Similarly, the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development also emphasises cross-sector linkages as part of a transformational change agenda. At the national level, some government agencies in the Pacific recognise the need to build inclusive coalitions for climate change action. For example, in the Solomon Islands, government stakeholders related to areas of climate change and the environment identified the need to include consideration for gender and social inclusion in the government's climate change policy. In Fiji, a newly formed task force led by the Department of Women is aiming to promote stronger cross-sector collaboration between government and civil society on gender and climate change. Initiatives such as these can build linkages between sectors and provide a platform for gender transformative climate change action.

4. GTCCA is complex, non-linear process with uncertain outcomes

It is important to recognise that gender transformative climate change action is a complex, non-linear process with uncertain outcomes. Climate change action needs to be responsive to uncertainty, similarly gender transformative programming needs to recognise that the trajectory of change is unknown (Hillenbrand et al 2015). Adaptive programming is required for both climate change action and gender transformative change. This is due to the underlying uncertainty surrounding both change processes, and that both are influenced by multiple external factors (Lenton et al 2008). Outcomes must be specific, designed locally, informed by local contexts and require engagement from multiple stakeholders at multiple levels within any given country context. The non-linear complex change process needs to be recognised and navigated well in order to make the best contributions through development programming.

To respond to uncertainty, development actors need to be equipped in processes that are iterative, open to learning and informed by reflective practices. Notions of adaptive pathways (Wise et al 2014) are helpful to navigate uncertainty, to define trajectories of change and also define monitoring mechanisms, decision triggers and feedback which enables course correction of new adaptive pathways towards transformative change. Likewise, action-learning activities (Reynolds 2011) are core to navigating uncertainty, with learning embedded within all activities and a recognition that the adaptive pathways will be required based on the changing contexts of climate change as well as social movements towards gender equality and social inclusion.

Definitions relevant to climate change are equally relevant to consideration as part of gender transformative climate change action. For example, incremental change refers to small, sometimes discrete changes that do not take into account the system in which they are situated. Incremental adaptation therefore refers to actions where the aim is to maintain existing approaches e.g. technological, institutional, governance, and value systems. Examples include adjustments to cropping systems via new varieties, changing planting times, or using more efficient irrigation (IPCC 2014). Changes in the fundamental attributes of a system are referred to as transformational change (ibid). Such transformations can occur at multiple levels (e.g. local, regional, national). Transformation is considered most effective at the national level, as it reflects systemic change, taking into account the country's approach and priorities to achieving sustainable development. GTCCA needs to include complementary activities that contribute to both incremental and transformative change.

As noted above, GTCCA requires action towards both transformational as well as incremental change, addressing immediate needs now and enabling long-term societal change. Although the endpoint is unknown, programming can focus on achieving discrete immediate and intermediate results that are stepping stones to longer-term transformation of gender relations, and adaptation to climate change. The notion of 'stepping stones' is described by in an AusAID/ADB paper recognising that process of change involved in empowering women are complex, 'change is rarely linear: breakthroughs in one dimension may be followed by setbacks in others' (2013:14). In this context, it is important to select gender equality outcomes that are realistic within the time frame of programme and project cycles, and that change is sustainable over the long-period and beyond NGO programming. It is also essential to identify immediate and intermediate results and indicators that are stepping-stones to transforming gender relations and achieving gender equality outcomes (ibid). This approach recognises the non-linearity of change. Similarly, GTCCA must also be concerned with structures and systems which inspire rights and responsibilities for equalities. Therefore, programming should pay attention to changes in gender relations in households, markets, communities and governments across local, national and international scales (Hillenbrand et al 2015), as noted in key dimension three.

Importantly GTCCA has at its core a concern for discrete changes which are responsive to the changing context, and at the same time a focus on changing the systems which are at the core of creating vulnerability and inequalities. Gender transformative climate change action involves challenging power structures inclusive of norms and attitudes which necessarily takes time for sustained change. Therefore, it is necessary to design adaptive and responsive programming that is embedded in local contexts and driven by local stakeholders (as outlined in key dimension one). A theory of change approach which captures multiple pathways to influence change and identities stepping stone outcomes can be an effective means to communicate programming options as well as monitor and evaluate programming contribution to change.

5. Inclusive legal frameworks to stimulate changes in norms and attitudes

Drivers of change regarding gender can come from a number of different angles. International and national legal frameworks, policies, plans and monitoring mechanisms can provide a mandate for a gender transformative approach across development programming in the Pacific, including climate change initiatives. Such legal changes can help to stimulate and promote changes in cultural norms and attitudes, which is essential for sustaining gender transformative change.

Changes in legal frameworks to recognise the gender implications of climate change is happening at the international level. For example, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979) provides a mobilising framework for gender equality. The CEDAW Committee recently recommended a gendered approach to climate change and disasters (CEDAW 2018), recognising that women's and girl's rights can be negatively affected by climate change. Many Pacific nations are signatories to CEDAW, thus are committing to operationalise practices that protect the needs of women, girls and people of diverse sexual and gender identities which are often heightened as a result of climate change and disasters.

National progress is also being made in some PICs to enact a GTCCA approach. For example, Fiji's National Adaptation Plan recognises that gender should be 'adequately integrated into adaptation projects across the planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation stages' (Government of Fiji 2017:7–8). Subsequently, Fiji's National Adaptation Plan Steering Committee includes representatives from the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and seeks consultation with representatives from civil society organisations with gender expertise for implementation of the plan's actions. This provides an example of progress towards integrated and multidimensional action which brings together concern for gender equality and climate change action.

In the Solomon Islands, there have been important legislative and policy reforms in gender equality. Milestones were the establishment of the Family Protection Act (2014) and inclusion of gender equality performance indicators for Permanent Secretaries and Gender Focal Points for Ministries. In 2017 the Solomon Islands launched their revised Gender Equality and Women's Development policy, the revised Eliminating Violence Against Women Policy and the new Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan (Kernot et al 2017).

Whilst the examples above primarily highlight advancements for women and girl's regarding climate change, progress towards achieving equality for people of diverse sexual and gender identities is still limited in the Pacific—in some countries more than others. In the Solomon Islands, homosexuality is illegal with imprisonment as punishment. This discrimination enhances their vulnerability to climate

change (see for example Dwyer and Woolf 2018). Both civil society and government stakeholders interviewed during the research acknowledged the lack of programming to address inequalities for people of diverse sexual and gender identities and reported experiences of discrimination especially in rural areas. Any actions to address these shortfalls therefore need to recognise the lack of legal provisions, as well as prevailing social norms. Importantly, action towards stronger inclusion and equalities for people of diverse sexual and gender identities needs to be done sensitively and in line with existing civil society actions which are culturally relevant and ensure safety and protection in local country contexts.

A further challenge to realising recent legislative and policy reforms, is that, in the Solomon Islands—and many Pacific countries, a large percentage of people live in rural areas which are far removed from the national capital where laws and policies are made. Some laws and policies are often not known about, implemented or enforced in rural areas. Sometimes laws are not appropriate for remote rural locations and community by-laws become more fit for purpose. Thus, whilst there are laws in place regarding gender and climate change, protections and benefits are not always realised, especially by those living in the rural and remote locations. This highlights how changes in laws and policies relating to gender and climate change take considerable time to affect real change on the ground in rural areas.

Conclusion

A gender transformative approach aims to tackle the underlying causes of inequality to overcome discrimination and inequitable power relations. Such an approach is critical in climate change programming, since gender inequalities can be amplified by the impacts of climate change. The research took a strengths-based approach, exploring elements of GTCCA that are already present in the Pacific region, in which to build upon to support a gender transformative approach. This paper has described these existing dimensions to implement a GTCCA approach. These dimensions include embedding the change process in the local context, building on the strengths already present and engaging with multiple sectors across multiple dimensions. It is also important to recognise that the change process is complex, non-linear and uncertain. Lastly, for sustainable change, it is important to work within—and also use—the legal frameworks to stimulate change. Organisations wishing to implement a gender transformative approach to climate change actions can therefore begin with these dimensions as entry points for more transformative change.

Note

Special thanks go to members of Nasau village in Fiji and Hulavu village in Solomon Islands whose hospitality and generosity provided important learning captured in this research. Authors also thank Plan International for their comments and review.

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