Gendering responses to El Niño in rural Peru

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Climatic disasters are a recurrent problem in Peru. The impacts of disasters differ between and within regions and communities. Rural upland communities, largely dependent on small-scale agriculture and natural resources for survival, are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of extreme climate events. Government policies have not only failed to mitigate this vulnerability, but have served to exacerbate it. Women face particular vulnerabilities in the context of extreme climate events. Traditional analysis and government policy approaches have served to obscure these. This article reflects on the gender-specific lessons learned by the Centre for Andean Advancement and Development, CEPRODA MINGA, during its work with poor rural communities in the Piura region of Peru in the aftermath of the 1997-8 El Niño phenomenon. It focuses on the ways in which rural communities, and women in particular, have traditionally been excluded from policy creation, and considers how they can become influential social and political actors creating their own strategies for sustainable development and disaster mitigation and preparedness.

Disasters are a recurrent problem in Peru. Over the past five years, around one million Peruvians have been directly affected by major disasters, and perhaps the same number again have experienced the negative effects of smaller-scale events (Villarreal 2002). One of the major disasters to take place in recent years was the 1997-8 El Niño phenomenon. El Niño is a regular climatic occurrence. It takes place every five years or so, when the cold Humboldt current that flows north from Antarctica along the coast of Chile and Peru is replaced with a warmer, southern-flowing current from the tropics. This new current raises sea temperature, and causes heavy rainfall, floods, and landslides in some areas, and drought in others. The severity of El Niño's impact varies from year to year, and from place to place.

While the relationship between global processes of climate change, and specific climate events like the 1997-8 El Niño remains unclear, one of the predicted outcomes of climate change is that extreme climate events will occur with greater frequency and severity. Existing experiences of responding to climate-related disasters, particularly those amongst more vulnerable populations, can offer important lessons for informing disaster prevention and mitigation in the future.

In Peru, the impacts of the 1997-8 El Niño phenomenon were particularly severe. Over 100,000 homes were either damaged or destroyed by floods and landslides, affecting around half a million people. Three-quarters of those affected were from rural areas (Villarreal 2002).

The Centre for Andean Advancement and Development, CEPRODA MINGA, is an NGO working in the Piura region of northern Peru. This mountainous, predominantly rural area is particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of
El Niño events. CEPRODA MINGA works with local communities to build women’s and men’s capacities as social and political actors, and to strengthen local institutions. CEPRODA MINGA undertakes participative planning with the region’s rural communities in order to influence the formation of local, regional, and national policies for sustainable development and disaster prevention. A principal objective of this work is to develop a ‘gender policy agenda’ for the region, and to mainstream an understanding of gender relations into all policy formation for sustainable development.

Differential impacts of the 1997-8 El Niño phenomenon in the Piura region

The impacts of the 1997-8 El Niño phenomenon varied considerably within and between regions in Peru. While agriculture in the coastal areas of Piura benefited from improved climatic conditions, its upland areas experienced heavy rainfall causing soil, forest, and crop degradation, and leading to decreased agricultural production and capacity (Torres 1998).

Small-scale agriculture and natural resources represent the principal source of food and income for rural upland communities in the Piura region. Repeated experience of severe El Niño events over recent decades, with inadequate environmental, economic, and social recovery in-between, has diminished these communities’ abilities to prepare for, and cope with, disaster. Food insecurity is an ongoing problem in the region, exacerbated, rather than created, by El Niño. The absence of an agrarian development policy with a focus on small-scale agriculture has led to food insecurity, increased rural-urban migration, and environmental degradation. In addition, before the disaster, national economic policies had favoured developments in coastal areas over those in the rural uplands. As a result, communities in upland areas found themselves in a doubly vulnerable situation at the time of El Niño. To survive in these conditions, small-scale agriculturalists have to exert considerable pressure on woods and other natural resources in order to supplement diminishing returns from agriculture. This negative cycle leaves their least powerful members increasingly vulnerable to loss, damage, and food insecurity (CLADEM 2001).

The losses and damages sustained during the El Niño event caused household income to fall dramatically during 1997, and increased the exposure of rural households to acute food insecurity. During the most critical period of El Niño, when many rural communities were flooded or cut-off, food supplies were extremely scarce, and prices increased to levels beyond the incomes of the poorest households.

Analysing the gender-differentiated impacts of El Niño

While the scientific community has developed a better understanding of, and ability to predict, El Niño events, this research has not prioritised a social analysis of the effects of El Niño, or a gender-differentiated understanding of El Niño’s impacts. Where social data have been collected, these have often been aggregated in a way that obscures gender differences. The observations below have arisen from CEPRODA MINGA’s work with rural communities in Piura.

Discrimination against women means that women in rural Piura typically have low access to education, specialist technical assistance, healthcare, or control over the family’s productive resources. These widespread and profound inequalities put poor women (and their children) in a situation of particular vulnerability to food insecurity during El Niño. Gender inequalities in food distribution and consumption within households were
common, including during periods where households as a whole appeared to have sufficient food. Widespread malnutrition also exposed women and children disproportionately to epidemics (acute respiratory and diarrhoeal infections, malaria, dengue, and cholera), which increased significantly during El Niño. Pregnant women were at particular risk from malaria, which causes serious complications during pregnancy, and other peri- and post-partum illnesses.

Increased migration of men out of the area into the coastal valleys and cities in search of employment increased the numbers of temporarily female-headed households. Female-headed households faced particular challenges in their attempts to survive the effects of El Niño. Women heads of households were typically not recognised as such by the major rural community organisations (largely led by men). Equally, the increased burden of household and agricultural work placed on women in the absence of men posed an acute limitation to their ability to seek paid employment.

Nonetheless, as we shall see, women in Piura were able to develop various survival strategies and capacities with which to tackle the problems generated by El Niño.

**Government responses to El Niño and disaster prevention in Peru**

**The El Niño policy context**
Peruvian regional authorities have barely acknowledged the differentiated effects of El Niño in the Piura region. This differentiation has political implications, and is connected with regional processes of development. Over the past 50 years, regional development models have favoured the development of agro-export industries (cotton and rice) in the coastal valleys, along with the development of major oil industry and irrigation infrastructure projects. Communities in rural upland areas have largely been excluded from these processes of development, and have suffered from the absence of an agrarian development policy focused on the needs and realities of subsistence farmers. National economic policy is dependent on primary exports of minerals, fish, and agricultural products, tending to marginalise considerations of environmental protection, sustainability, or small-scale production for local consumption. The concentration of economically-important industry in the coastal region also entailed that the majority of emergency and reconstruction interventions taking place during and following El Niño were focused on coastal areas.

**Understanding and responding to disasters – the failure of top-down responses**
The mainstream view of El Niño events is to consider them as isolated and bounded disasters, arising from natural causes, which must be scientifically understood, predicted, controlled, and prevented using large-scale technical interventions (Wilches-Chaux 1998). The Peruvian government’s response to the threat of El Niño has typically been to prioritise the construction of preventative physical infrastructure and other technical responses, and to focus this on regions of greater national economic importance. A view of disasters as isolated occurrences creates an approach to civil defence that is restricted and temporary, and prevents its institutionalisation as a part of everyday life. There has been little attempt to mobilise the population in disaster prevention. The 1997-8 El Niño event highlighted the gross weaknesses in the National Civil Defence System, as local and regional actors had practically no involvement in decision-making processes. The inevitable result of this has been the creation of a widespread sense among the population that disaster response is a
matter for the state, and not for communities themselves to confront (Rivero and Cuba 2001).

A contrasting approach, taken by CEPRODA MINGA and others, is to view El Niño and other disasters as the outcome of long-term social and political processes. These disasters expose the vulnerability of people faced with environmental threats, caused by natural events or human activities. This approach accounts more effectively for the pattern of differentiated effects of El Niño, within and between communities and households. It also accounts for the long-term accumulation of vulnerabilities amongst rural upland communities that have been repeatedly affected by disasters, with little opportunity or assistance to rebuild their capabilities. The political invisibility of these communities has left them excluded from wider development processes. This, combined with repeated severe El Niño shocks, the lack of a powerful civil defence movement, and a lack of access to government emergency responses, has locked both men and women, and particularly women, into a cycle of environmental degradation of increasingly marginal lands, and resulting continual food insecurity (CEPRODA MINGA 1999).

El Niño events are an inevitable aspect of the Peruvian climate. They bring both opportunities and threats in accordance with their severity, and the geography of specific places. It is essential for communities to adapt to these in order to survive and to develop sustainably. In the view of CEPRODA MINGA, this can only come about through the transformation of the social and political processes that generate disasters into processes creating sustainable development. This requires the full participation of all community members (CEPRODA MINGA 2001).

**Mainstreaming gender in development work and humanitarian response**

While it is clear that there have been efforts on the part of public and private institutions in Piura to incorporate a gender perspective into their work, this has commonly been treated as a technical aspect of the planning and analysis of development projects. This approach impedes the development of a better understanding of women's empowerment as a social and political process aimed at transforming the unequal relationships between men and women, within households, communities, and society at large.

**Women organising locally for survival**

During recent decades, women in the Piura region have been active in forming a range of women's organisations locally; these include the Comités de Vaso de Leche ('glass of milk committees'), Comedores Populares (canteens), and Clubes de Madres ('mothers' clubs'). All of these forms of organisation are intended to improve food security and nutrition within rural communities. Within these organisations, women members have full participatory rights to vote and voice their opinions.

During the critical period of El Niño, women leaders from Alta Piura assumed a decisive role. They took a lead in rehousing families who had lost homes, managing the distribution of emergency aid, and forming local work groups. There were many opportunities for women to demonstrate their skills as community leaders and protectors, despite their increased vulnerabilities.

However, this process of formation of women's survival organisations, and their high profile during the disaster, was only very weakly linked with wider processes of political or social empowerment of women (Rivero, Afonso, and Eggart 2002). While women were active in leading interventions locally, they were largely absent
from institutions at the district, provincial, and regional levels. While they were accustomed to having voice and vote within the dedicated women’s organisations, the ‘principal’ community organisations like the Comunidades and Rondas Campesinas (civil guards) only gave voting participation to widows, single women, and other women without a man to represent them. Although women’s contributions to community survival within the emergency context were widely recognised, men held all the technical, management, and decision-making roles in the civil defence committee, the principal organisation charged with responding to the disaster.

While disasters like El Niño can offer women opportunities to assume new leadership roles and activities at a local level, the experience of the 1997-8 El Niño event showed that this increased local visibility was not translated into wider transformations in gender relations. When combined with the increased pressures and vulnerabilities that poor rural women in particular faced during the El Niño crisis, there is a real danger that women are simply burdened with extra tasks for no political or social reward. Project planners in disaster situations need to take care that encouraging women’s greater participation in community-level initiatives does not load them with additional tasks and responsibilities, while failing to accord them with greater power and access to formal political bodies and national development processes.

CEPRODA MINGA realised that in the context of disasters, women’s needs change. This is a result of the ways in which women’s increased role as protagonists within the emergency response combines with the disproportionate risk that women will suffer chronic malnutrition or illness (see Table 1).

**CEPRODA MINGA – developing strategies for civil defence**

CEPRODA MINGA considers that the management of disaster risk is one of the central concerns of disaster prevention. When disasters are viewed as the result of long-term imbalances between societies and their environment, disaster risk-management also becomes a long-term commitment. This approach emphasises the management of risk and vulnerability before disaster occurs (Rivero and Cuba 2001). We use the term ‘disaster risk-management’ to refer to the technical and political capacity of women and men, and their organisations and institutions, to transform the social processes that generate disasters and convert them into processes of sustainable development. Democracy is essential to this transformation.

Capacity-building with rural people to enhance their full participation in political and social processes, and particularly in the creation of regional development policy, has been the main focus of CEPRODA MINGA’s work following the El Niño event. We have been able to take advantage of wider political changes in Peru that have followed the end of the Fujimori government, including a renewed emphasis on democracy and decentralisation, and the strengthening of national civil defence systems. From the outset, we knew that overcoming discrimination against women would be crucial if women, and poor women in particular, were not to be excluded from the benefits of these changes.

**The CEPRODA MINGA interventions**

The CEPRODA MINGA capacity-building projects were implemented during the reconstruction period following the 1997-8 El Niño, in Chalaco, a very remote mountain district in Piura. The outcomes of El Niño in this district included forest and
Table 1: Capacities and vulnerabilities of rural women in the context of the 1997-8 El Niño disaster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vulnerability</th>
<th>Capacity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizenship and social organisation</strong></td>
<td>• Educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased numbers of women face a double burden of responsibility, as both income-generators and carers for children and the elderly</td>
<td>• Social sensitivity and capacity for solidarity</td>
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<td>• Women frequently do not have control of resources (water, land, housing). As such, they may be limited in their ability to make decisions in these areas during an emergency.</td>
<td>• Transparent management of resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Women have limited access to training, information, or education</td>
<td>• Willingness to learn and to share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Domestic violence is frequent and widespread, as a result of economic difficulties</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Women often feed their families in preference to themselves and are thus at increased risk of malnutrition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Women are not able to participate in the ‘principal’ decision-making organisations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychological attitude</strong></td>
<td>• Women have a strong sense of family and community responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Women perceive themselves to be dependent on their husbands</td>
<td>• Women have the capacity to mobilise their organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Women experience increases in stress as a result of food insecurity and epidemics</td>
<td>• Women exhibit strong pragmatism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Women perceive themselves to be marginalised</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical and material factors</strong></td>
<td>• Women as protectors of their community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pregnancy</td>
<td>• Women search for means of survival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Illness</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Lactation in a context of widespread malnutrition</td>
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Crop destruction, increased soil erosion, and an increase in illnesses as a result of food insecurity and shortages of clean water.

CEPRODA MINGA initiated participatory planning processes within the Chalaco communities. These processes were intended to go beyond technical discussions of disaster prevention and management to consider how communities might build new kinds of social and political relationships and institutions.
These relationships and institutions would involve all their members in decision-making and consensus-building.

Creating sustainable risk-management mechanisms among disaster-ridden communities is dependent upon ‘social capital’: the intricate web of social relations and networks that characterise those communities. One aim of the participatory planning processes was to identify these relationships and networks, and to enable communities to use them as a basis for the development of strong rural institutions. Another aim was to explore and value different forms of local knowledge and culture, and to consider how this ‘cultural capital’ might be valuable in the management of disaster risks.

The importance of mainstreaming gender relations into participatory planning

Gender perspectives were integrated into all stages of the planning process, as part of the process of valuing different kinds of knowledge and cultural and social capacities. However, we noted from the early stages of our intervention that when men and women interact, women have a tendency to subordinate their gender-specific needs and demands within the wider discussion. Through the intervention we learned that it was necessary to empower women in articulating their gender-specific needs to enable them to negotiate solutions in participatory decision-making fora.

While women have been able to participate in decision-making bodies at the level of their community or district, they have typically been absent from other, higher, levels of decision-making. We realised that local-level plans to articulate and respond to women’s gender-specific needs would fail unless they were linked to higher-level changes in public policy. For this reason, we realised that, in addition to the local participatory planning processes, it would be important to create a ‘gender policy agenda’, with the aim of influencing and creating gender policies at the regional level. A key aspect of this is the empowerment of women to demand accountability in relation to these policies, to ensure that gender policies are not simply reduced to empty declarations of principles or tools for technical analysis, or filed away in the offices of bureaucrats.

A key part of the promotion of the regional gender policy agenda, which is ongoing, involves building on the base of women’s widespread local organisational processes to create regional representatives who can negotiate gender-specific demands in decision-making fora at all levels. Currently, CEPRODA MINGA is promoting the ‘gender policy agenda’ at a regional level in an electoral context: for the first time, regional elections are being held in all regions of Peru. Through consultation with public and private institutions, CEPRODA MINGA is supporting a regional centralisation process for women’s organisations. It sees these as as important emerging actors in the country’s democratic transition.

However, we realise that we need to create a permanent regional-level gender post if the gender policy agenda is to become reality.

Increasing women’s participation in local organisations

The participatory planning processes, and the development of women’s capacities to articulate their strategic gender needs, are beginning to increase women’s visibility in community decision-making spaces. Women are increasingly participating in decision-making spaces that would have been 100 per cent masculine just a few years ago. Men have increasingly learned to listen to and take into account women leaders’ opinions as a result of the consultation and participatory processes. As a result, the women of Piura have made
significant advances in participating in wider development processes, and ensuring that their needs and interests are being included in development strategies. Local systems for sustainable development and disaster prevention have been strengthened through women’s participation.

From the beginning of our interventions, existing women’s organisations such as the ‘glass of milk’ committees, mothers’ clubs, and the Rondas Campesinas Femeninas, actively participated in meetings, guaranteeing the representation of their households and localities. In some cases, women have taken on major responsibilities, for example in the hamlet of Nogal Chalaco, where for the first time in history a woman was elected president of the Committee for Small-Scale Producers of Coffee and Sugar Cane.

There have been changes within local-level community organisations, where women have taken on more leadership positions representing women’s interests, and gained voting powers and a voice in district assemblies. There has also been greater recognition of women’s rights in local judicial systems. In the ‘principal’ local organisations like the District Assembly of the Chalaco Rondas Campesinas, women and men now both have a right to vote, with women also assuming some leadership roles. Where the Rondas Campesinas are involved in local judicial processes, there have been advances in their willingness and ability to recognise women’s rights, something which has not taken place widely in the formal justice system.

In mixed organisations like the small-scale coffee and sugar-cane producers’ committees, women have become more conscious of their role as producers and citizens. In Peru, as elsewhere, there is a widespread devaluation and lack of recognition of women’s role in productive activities. This is considered at most as a supportive role within the traditional household division of labour. Women have traditionally considered the productive activities that they undertake to be a form of support to male producers. Typically, women who undertake agricultural activities declare themselves to be housewives or petty traders at the time of the census. As a result, women’s role in productive activities has been invisible in registers and statistics, and has not been widely recognised or appreciated.

Since the beginning of the CEPRODA MINGA interventions, women have begun to make themselves more visible within these organisations, as producers involved in all aspects of production. Increasingly, women are assuming leadership posts in the central directive, and promoting technological innovation in their small-holdings, which is in turn strengthening the capacities of new female leaders.

**Rural women – from survival strategies to regional development**

For rural women there has been a significant shift from focusing on survival strategies within local community groups to engaging in wider development processes. Women have moved from expressing demands linked to their practical needs, such as improvements in feeding programmes and service delivery, to making their ‘strategic’ gender needs and their role as social actors increasingly visible in local consultation processes. Today, women are demanding to be considered as workers equal to men, within development programmes; they express the need to build capacity in the exercise of their rights in order to confront situations of gender violence and abuse, and to challenge instances of unjust rulings and decision-making by authorities in favour of men. According to statistical data from the area, boys and girls have now got equal access to public education, which is an important change compared with 1990 when girls had very limited access.
Conclusions

Sustainable development in Piura will be a long-term process. Similarly, we realise that there is a long way to go in achieving real equality between women and men in all areas. Nonetheless, as a result of the CEPRODA MINGA interventions, a better understanding of disaster prevention has developed within the Chalaco communities. Where, previously, the idea of rural development was associated with physical infrastructure and centralised decision-making, CEPRODA MINGA’s interventions have contributed to the creation of a widespread new understanding of how people can develop their own capacities to transform their situation. At an assembly meeting, both male and female participants spoke of how they now felt able to talk directly with authorities, whereas before they went through intermediaries. This, they felt, had enabled them to claim their rights as citizens and take their proposals to larger political fora that have hitherto been considered as excluding and ignoring rural people’s concerns. Importantly, the participative planning process has enabled rural people – women and men – to create and promote their own proposals for democratic government and local development in a context of decentralisation.

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Notes

1. This article has been translated from Spanish and adapted by Kate Kilpatrick.
2. These organisations typically only recognise women who do not have a man to represent them, such as single women and widows. When a woman’s husband is absent from the community for migratory work or some other reason, she is not usually recognised by these organisations as the acting household head.
3. Rural women who migrate to the larger towns in the region usually obtain income through domestic work or through petty commerce. During El Niño, these opportunities decreased considerably as households across the region were affected by the disaster.
4. In fact, communities in Peru were previously better-adapted to El Niño events than they are today. Agricultural changes and humanitarian aid packages have created widespread dependence on external inputs, displacing traditional native plant varieties (for example, the yacon \(\text{Smallanthus sonchifolius}\), and native bean and potato species) which are often better adapted to the climatic conditions.
5. The communities that displayed a better organisational response to El Niño were those where participative processes and grassroots NGOs were in existence long before the disaster. These institutions and communities appeared to emerge strengthened rather than undermined from the El Niño emergency and reconstruction period. Those communities and institutions with scant experience of popular participation typically fell prey to welfarism and clientelism.
References


