



LOOKING AHEAD Without understanding people's opportunity spaces, talking about their adaptive capacity is void of meaning

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People within the same community or landscape might face a similar agro-ecological environment while their socio-institutional environment may differ and depend on multiple distinct social factors. Their 'opportunity spaces' (i.e. set of opportunities for each individual despite constraints) and 'agency' (an individual's capacity to make life choices and act upon them) often differ. Understanding people's opportunity spaces and agency and their differences depending on multiple factors (e.g. between men and women), provides insights into how individuals experience trade-offs and creates an understanding of people's motivations.

This may be particularly relevant to researchers and policy-makers focusing on environment and agricultural productivity to help highlight why not all individuals make the same choices or behave in the same way when faced with similar tradeoffs.

Overview

Opportunity space refers to the constraints and opportunities associated with the socio-institutional and agro-ecological environment of the individual which affect one's agency. Agency is 'the capacity to make important life choices and to act upon them' (Kabeer, 1999). Understanding opportunity space allows us to illuminate and explain the range of options which specific women and men have, and experience as having at their disposal to establish or expand their livelihood. You could say it shapes how an individual experiences a trade-off.

Not only do opportunity spaces shape people's adaptive capacity, they also determine the directions in which this capacity can or might develop. Different people within the same community or landscape might face a similar agro-ecological environment but their socio-institutional environment often differs, depending on different social factors. Gender tends to be a key force shaping opportunity spaces, especially in low and middle income countries. This is because, in each society or culture, there are often strict ideas about how women and men should behave, what kind of livelihoods or activities are appropriate for them and also how and by which gender property and assets should be controlled. Other social factors which often are important in shaping opportunity spaces and intersect with gender are age, wealth, family support, education and ethnicity, amongst others.

Individual preferences and aspirations are also key for defining opportunity spaces, even if there are various other uncontrolled (i.e. external to the individual) factors at play! Of course these are influenced by what people know and by external factors as well, but they can still widely differ between individuals. We showed for instance how young women and men from the same rural community in Central Uganda and with fairly similar backgrounds had very different aspirations when it came to farming. Ranging from zero interest to conceiving agriculture as the primary and preferred livelihood.

Apart from understanding opportunity spaces at the individual level, using this same lens to look at opportunities pertaining to community or landscape level challenges can be illuminating. This can help to understand people's motivations beyond cliches, for example that 'poor farmers prefer short-term benefits over long-term sustainability' or that people will act primarily on the basis of economic considerations.

As an example of this, our landscape study in southwestern Uganda found that most farmers choose to focus on mono-cropping of cooking banana, whereas this was only profitable and sustainable for larger and wealthier farmers who could afford investments in soil fertility and had other sources of income to get through periods of drought or low banana market prices. On a landscape level, this preference led to high vulnerability to drought, disappearance of natural land in favor of expansion of land under banana production, was associated with shortage of firewood and grazing land, led to soil fertility decline, and a decrease in the quality of diets.

It seemed to be both the promise of wealth through banana production and the idea of being 'locked-in' or trapped in this specific trajectory, which kept farmers from exploring alternative options. Their adaptive capacity had become very limited and different social groups were differently affected.

Relevance to different spatial and temporal levels

Understanding opportunity spaces is important to take into account at each spatial level - from individual or farm level (via household) to community and landscape level. Not all individuals make the same choices or behave in the same way when faced with similar tradeoffs and this is critical to keep in mind for researchers and policy-makers who are working at the intersection of environmental health and agricultural productivity.

Key terms

- **Opportunity space** - This refers to the constraints and opportunities associated with the socio-institutional and agro-ecological environment of the individual which affect one's agency. There are generally two sets of factors identified which shape the opportunity space in rural places. The first relates to the physical and more tangible specifics of the rural location (market access, natural resource base, etc.), which form the basis of farmers' livelihood strategies. The second set of factors captures the social and relational specifics, such as norms and personal aspirations.
- **Agency** - This refers to an individual's 'capacity to make important life choices and to act upon them' (Kabeer, 1999)

Key references

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