The challenge: RTB crops are important in Rwanda and Burundi, but yields are low

RTB crops are important for producing food and earning an income in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. Here, potatoes and bananas are often grown to sell, while sweetpotato and cassava are crucial for feeding rural families. In 2017 the two countries produced 2.97 million tons of banana, 3.33 million tons of cassava, 1 million tons of potatoes and 1.78 million tons of sweetpotatoes. Rwandans eat more sweetpotatoes than in any other country, 89 kg per person a year, compared with the world average of 14 kg.

Yet yields of these RTB crops are generally low and understanding household decision-making and work-sharing can help to improve production and equity. The bargaining power of women—for example, to make decisions about their labor and household resources—is related to complex patterns of access to land and loans as well as distance to market. Rural people in Burundi and Rwanda see cash crops, like potatoes and bananas, as “male” crops. But sweetpotato and cassava, which often end up in the family cooking pot, are “female” crops.

According to conventional wisdom, in African agriculture, men make most of the decisions and leave the bulk of the work to women. Yet a new study from Rwanda and Burundi suggests’ that this picture may be incorrect. Men and women household members often decide together how to manage their roots, tubers and banana (RTB) crops, and most of the work on potato, banana, sweetpotato and cassava is done by men, especially in female-headed households.

Land and capital in Rwanda and Burundi

Both countries are overwhelmingly rural; 71% of the population lives in rural areas in Burundi and 90% in Rwanda. There is little formal credit, but some informal loans are offered by NGOs, village savings and loan associations or from input dealers. Loans range from $34 to $55 in Rwanda, and $12 or less in Burundi. Mean land size in both countries is often less than 1.25 ha.

Research solution: understand household labor and decision-making

A survey of labor and decision-making was conducted in 2014 in Rwanda and Burundi. Rural people were asked who makes the farming decisions and who does the work in four RTB crops, including two cash crops (potatoes and bananas) and two food security crops (sweetpotatoes
and cassava). Answers were compared for male-headed households and female-headed households, and correlated with land size, household size, distance to the main road and to market, access to extension services, age of household head, income and credit. The questionnaire was conducted in the Ruhengeri watershed of Rwanda (184 women and 222 men) and in the Rusizi watershed of Burundi (261 women and 144 men).

**Findings**

In one striking difference between the two countries, female-headed households in Rwanda had no off-farm source of income, and they earned just half as much as male-headed households. On the other hand, in Burundi most women-headed households earned as much money as those headed by men.

In both countries, however, it was common for men and women in male-headed households to make decisions jointly and for men and women to provide labor for cash crops (potatoes and bananas). Quite surprisingly, men tended to do most of the work and make more decisions in female-headed households.

For food crops (sweetpotato and cassava), both men and women were more likely to participate in labor and decision-making. Again, and counter-intuitively, men provided most of the labor and made the decisions for food crops in female-headed households. The reasons for this are unclear, but women may be able to call on their grown sons, fathers or other relatives for help with farm work.

**Conclusions**

In both countries, men are more likely than women to report that women also participate in decision-making. It is not clear why men and women have this different perception.

Men make more decisions when markets are farther away, perhaps because women are constrained from making long trips away from home. The lower incomes of women in Rwanda may be because they are farther from the capital city, 100 km away, as opposed to just 20–30 km in Burundi.

In general, higher-income households were correlated with more joint decision-making, and those with access to credit were more likely to report making decisions jointly. As farm income (and farm size) increased, so did the tendency for men and women to jointly decide how to manage their RTB crops. When farms are small, men are more likely to let their wives manage them.

Whether headed by men or by women, households depend on men for most of the labor. It is not clear why men are more likely to decide on and do the farm work in female-headed households.

Although women do work on RTB crops, it is simply not true that they provide 60–80% of the labor. Men do tend to make more decisions for bananas and potatoes (i.e., cash crops); the tendency is slight, however. This calls into question the stereotype that potatoes and bananas are male crops, whereas cassava and sweetpotatoes are female crops.

Further studies may explain why female participation in agriculture declines in female-headed households. Such a study should capture the number of hours worked by men and women in the various tasks needed to produce a harvest of these important crops.

Households are complicated places, where men and women work, live and decide together in ways that may defy simple generalizations.

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