Water, Women and Extractive Industries: Getting Serious on Gender in the Highlands of Peru

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Peru is the world’s largest producer of silver, and the second largest producer of copper. Recent years have seen a considerable boom in the expansion of the mining sector, with new deposits and extractive operations appearing in remote rural areas. Currently, all major mineral deposits, and the operations linked to them, lie in high-altitude areas of the Peruvian sierra, and overlap almost exactly with the lands of rural women and men who use this same resource base for cattle farming and subsistence agriculture. Most of these communities are poor and lack even basic infrastructure for water capture and sound management, depending solely on scarce rainwater and some springs. For indigenous mountain women, this means fetching water from far away, relying on springs that are becoming more and more unreliable due to the changing weather patterns. Due to the limited presence of the Peruvian state in the most remote mountain areas, the companies have turned into a (quasi-) benefactor, playing the role of the state and providing basic services to the rural population. Modern legislation, the demand of shareholders, and the fear of escalating conflicts over water resources have driven the private companies to expand their corporate social responsibility programmes and budgets. However, many of these lack a long-term vision over sustainable water management and completely ignore the tremendous knowledge and capacities of mountain women. This presentation builds on recent innovations in the IFAD country programme in Peru. It demonstrates the importance of enhancing gender-sensitive public-private partnerships for territorial development, and explores the huge role women can play in advancing food security, territorial development and social peace in the highlands of Peru – if only they are given the chance.