Active role of social network in choice and practice of livelihood: A case study in Southern Province, Zambia

Research background

In the rural society of many developing countries, including those in Africa, non-agricultural activities play a vital role in sustaining and improving their living conditions. In this study, the word "livelihood" refers not only to the main activities involved in sustaining livelihood, but also to other activities that rural people engage in.

Since 2006, I have been conducting fieldwork in the villages in Zambia that suffer from periodic droughts. Through this fieldwork, I have examined the role of labour migration in these drought-affected areas. The results reveal that people in the study area tend to migrate as a result of drought. However, even when there is an average or sufficient amount of rain, labour migration is one option they still choose, taking into consideration their access to other income sources in rural areas and also the social and cultural context. The role and importance of labour migration differs among households, reflecting differences in access to livelihood activities [Ito 2009].

What creates these differences in access to livelihood activities? Many studies have considered it from the viewpoints of gender, age, and educational background. Some studies have reported that households with fewer assets and resources cannot engage in profitable activities because of the prohibitively high entry cost. It is important to examine the factors that influence differences in access to livelihood activities not only on the basis of attributes, but on the basis of other dimensions as well.

Research purpose and aim

When people were interviewed in regard to why they migrated, they indicated that migration to towns is comparable activities to wage labour called "piecework," which is provided by some better-off households in the rural area. In accessing piecework or in labour migration to towns, social networks with better-off households in the former or relatives and friends in towns in the latter is essential.

This research utilizes social network analysis to examine how the structure of individual social networks affects one's choice and practice of livelihood activities.

Methodology

This research was carried out in Lusitu Ward, Siavonga District in Southern Province, Zambia. The period of fieldwork was June to August 2010. During this period, I conducted interviews with all heads of households and their spouses (N = 87) in regard to

Figure 1   Landscape of study area
(Dry season)

who they rely and count on when facing difficulties related to food, money, and other things. In rural society, networks of friends and acquaintances expand unlimitedly. Therefore, in this research, I focused on who people trusted and spoke with during times of difficulty and how it influenced the choice and practice of piecework and labour migration.

In this research, I adopted the "Name generator method" as I wanted to identify networks that crossed the boundaries of villages and even rural areas. I limited the number of people mentioned to five, in accordance with the general number (three to five) utilized in research method of social networks[1] [cf. Hiramatsu et al. 2010]. In analysing data, I utilized "pajek[2]," which is large network analysis software.
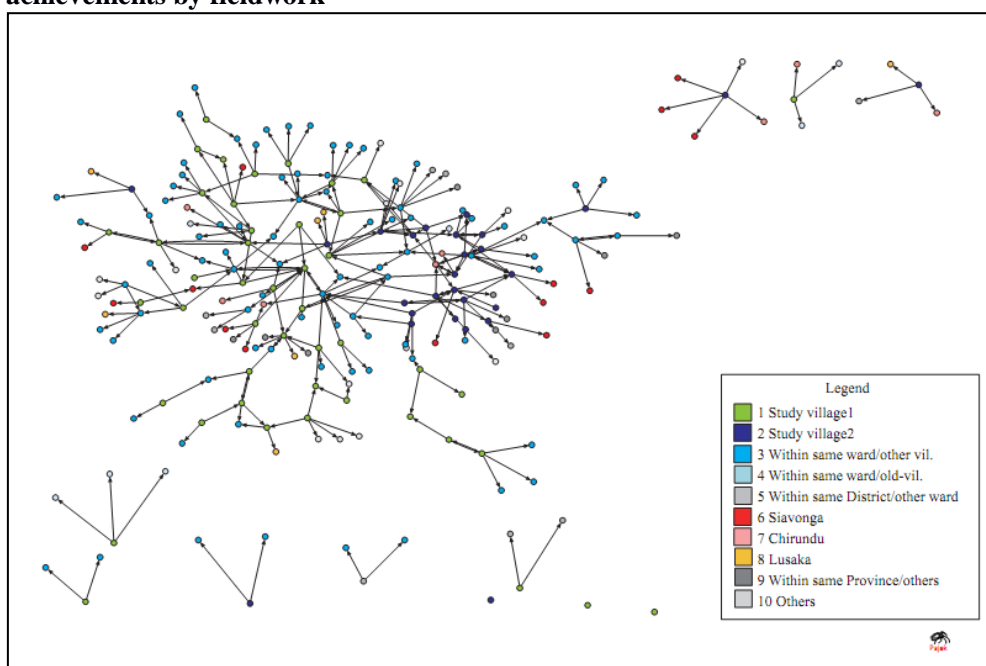
Results and achievements by fieldwork

Figure 2 Help and trust networks in the study area and their residence

Notes: Within same ward/old village; People in the study area were forced to migrate because of the Kariba Dam construction in 1958. Therefore, I refer to the villages where people resided before they migrated as the "old" villages.

Figure 2 depicts the entire network created on the basis of the results of all interviews (hereinafter called "help and trust networks"). Each node represents a single person. The line with arrows depicts the relationship between nodes. The departure points of lines are informants (N = 87) and the number of other nodes that mentioned names but were not interviewed was 141. The total number of nodes in this network is thus 228. The colour of each node indicates their residence. Green and blue denote villagers in the study area (informants).

In this network, there are some subgroups. The largest subgroup is located in the upper left in Fig. 2, which contains 149 nodes. Most informants and their social networks are linked with other informants and their

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[1] During interviews, I explained to informants that there were two conditions in regard to the five people they would mention: 1) they cannot include members of the same household that they currently belong to and 2) they can include people who reside in other rural areas, towns, and cities. I received support from a schoolteacher whose mother tongue is the same as that of the study area in order to verify the wording of the questions. I carried out the questioning alongside a translator for all interviews.

[2] http://vlado.fmf.uni-lj.si/pub/networks/pajek/

networks, forming the largest weak component. Most informants mentioned people who lived in the same village or other villages in the same region.

There are three nodes that were isolated from all others. These nodes are informants who did not know any people who satisfy the conditions of the question and who were not mentioned in the answers by other informants. Figure 3 presents the distribution of input degree in the help and trust network. It illustrates that most people named less than two people. However, 4% of people were named by more than four people; in this network, they have structural prestige.
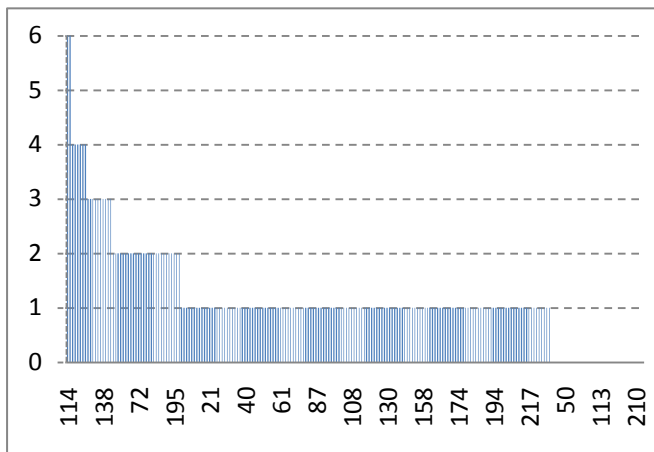

Figure 3 Distribution of input degree in help and trust network (N = 228)

Notes: Vertical axis represents the input degree and horizontal axis represents the ID No. of each informant.

Figure 2 also depicts the social relationships of informants that extend beyond rural areas. Lusaka is the capital city of Zambia and can be reached in three hours by car from the study area. Siavonga (which is the capital town of this district) and Chirundu are neighbouring small towns with populations of approximately 10,000. From the study area, it takes less than one hour by car to reach these towns. Figure 2 indicates that there are some informants who mentioned friends or relatives living in neighbouring towns (coloured in red and pink).

In Fig. 4, the size of each node differs by labour migration experience. The largest node has experienced labour migration many times. Of the three subgroups located in the upper right, the third network from the right is the one for S.S (ID No.205). This
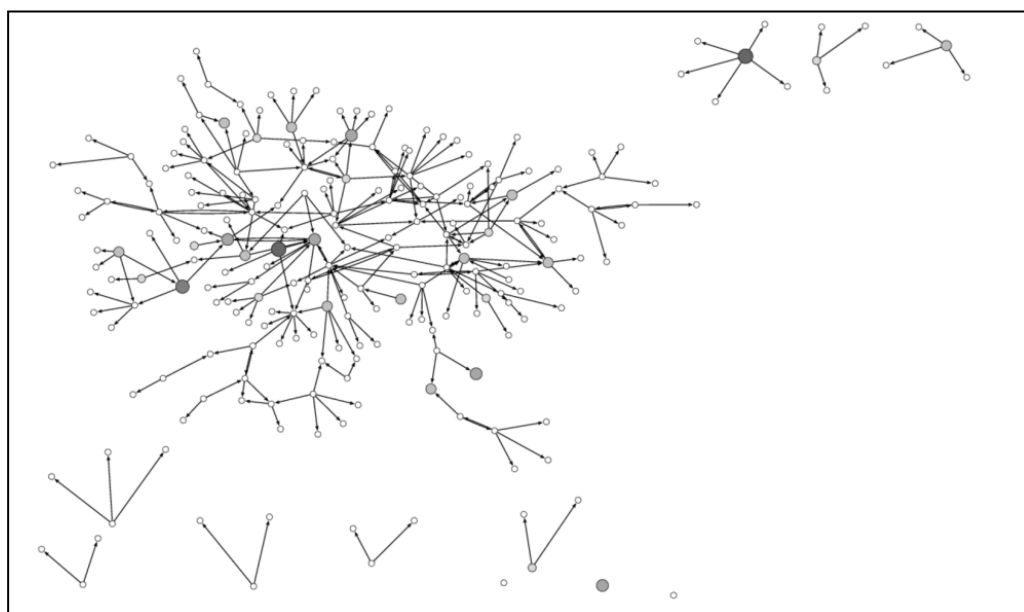

Figure 4 Help and trust network and labour migration experience of each informant

individual migrated five times; therefore, the central node is larger than the other nodes. From Fig. 2, it is evident that this individual mentioned five people living in neighbouring towns. In fact, as a result of a former migration, someone in his network introduced him to an employment opportunity in another town so he left to work.

Of all the cases of labour migration I have collected through previous fieldworks, Siavonga and Chirundu are the destination cities in almost 60% of cases. Factors such as geographical closeness, social networks (most people in the study area have relatives and friends in towns), and the demand for casual and unskilled labour in developing towns make it easier for people in the study area to choose labour migration to neighbouring towns, which becomes an important livelihood activity in the study area. Few households receive periodic remittances in the study area. However, from this network, it is clear that relatives and friends in towns work as lifelines for rural people facing difficulty. For S.S (ID No.205), it is evident that the character of his individual network enhances his livelihood activities, in this case, labour migration to towns.

In some areas where rural society and towns interact socially and economically, as in the study area, livelihood activities of rural areas change. It is important for rural people to obtain information and contacts related to new livelihood activities. Therefore, social network research and analysis is essential in understanding social relationships as a resource.

Implication and impacts on future research

In this paper, I focused solely on the general characteristics of the help and trust network and its relation to labour migration. In the future, I will perform further analysis to connect this network data and other social and economic data that I have collected through previous research. In particular, I will examine how access to piecework in rural areas differs by links to nodes with structural prestige (high input degree) or with high betweenness centrality. This analysis was performed on the level of the individual, but it remains important to analyse the same data at the household level. Moreover, continuous research is needed to observe change in social networks and its relation to livelihood activities over time.

References
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