

LADDER OF LIFE:

Qualitative data collection tool to understand local perceptions of poverty dynamics

Introduction

The Ladder of Life is a focus group tool conducted with poor women and men. It is meant to explore their understandings and interpretations of the different wellbeing groups and the poverty trend in their community, and the key factors and processes seen to shape these dynamics. Here we review the purpose of the tool, highlight key fieldwork procedures, and reproduce the interview guide. We also provide an example of fieldnotes from the GENNOVATE research initiative.¹



Women construct Ladder of Life during GENNOVATE fieldwork in Malawi. Photo: Vongai Kandiwa.

Purpose of method

The Ladder of Life tool generates:

- **Multidimensional and gender-differentiated narrative evidence** on perceptions of opportunities for and barriers to escaping poverty in a community, and insights into the local culture of inequality, normative expectations, and social group differences that underpin these poverty dynamics.
- **Comparative statistics** on household poverty trends at the community level that are contextually grounded in local understandings and categories of wellbeing and illbeing.
- **Improved understanding of social and gender dimensions affecting technology adoption and benefits** among the poorer social groups in a community, and wider processes of development and social change underway in an intervention area.
- **Collaborative research processes** that i) give importance to understanding poor women's and men's own interpretations of and experiences with poverty and socio-economic mobility; and ii) invest in and nurture commitment to shared learning and action among stakeholders at diverse levels.

The tool can be adapted for formative or applied research objectives, monitoring and learning needs, longitudinal research, or mixed-methods approaches.

¹ For fuller discussion of method than is possible in this briefing note, see Petesch, Badstue and Prain (2018) for the version applied in the GENNOVATE study. See Narayan and Petesch (2005) for the original Ladder of Life module.

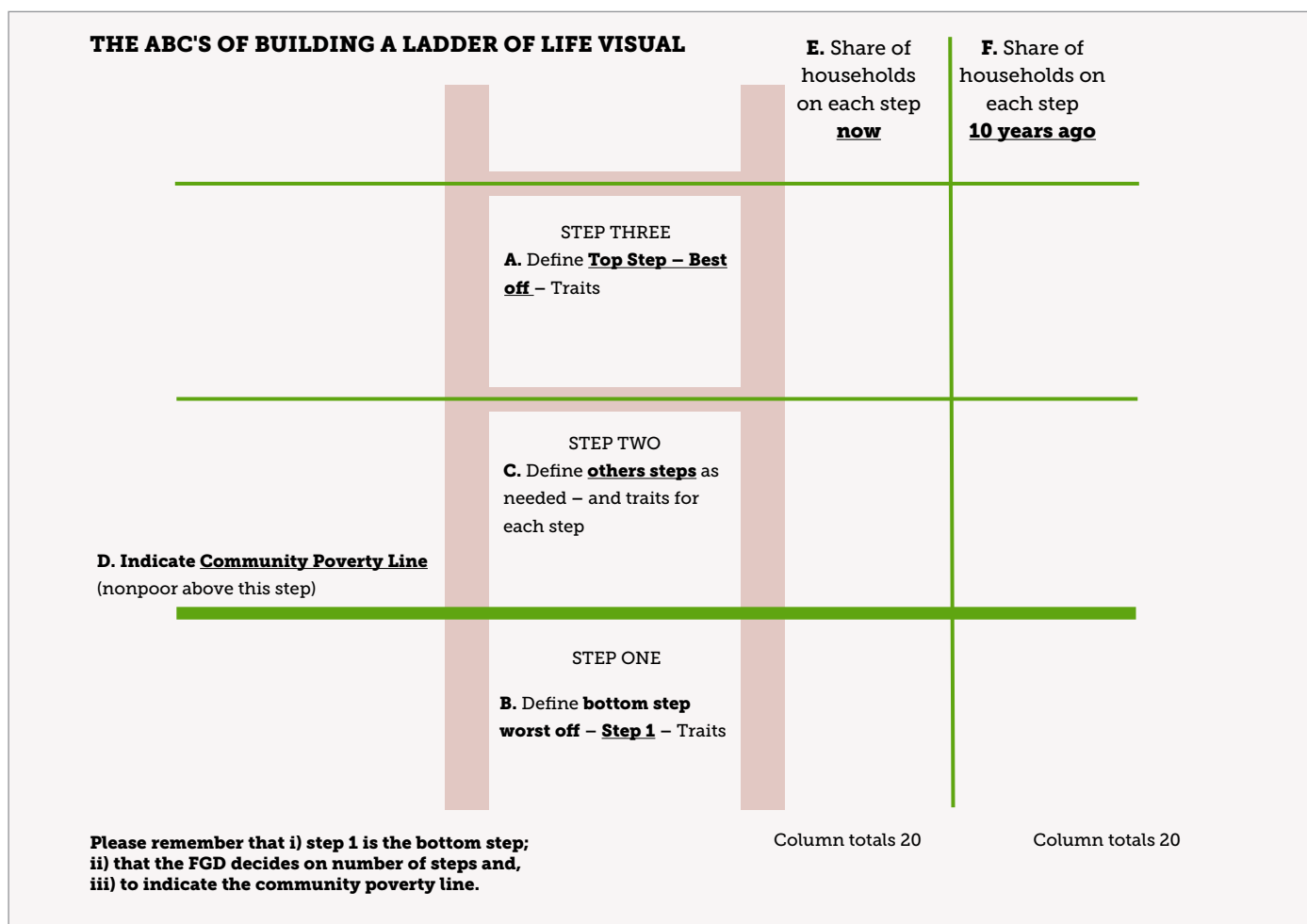
Overview of Ladder of Life

The GENNOVATE methodology calls for conducting the Ladder of Life with two (sex-specific) focus groups of poor women and men in each study village. The tool requires skilled facilitation and approximately 60 to 90 minutes to complete in the field.

The facilitator begins by explaining that the focus group is going to build their own Ladder of Life to represent the different wellbeing groups in their community. First, the focus group reflects on the characteristics of the “best-off” households in their village, who are represented on the top step of the ladder. Next, focus group members are directed to the bottom step of the ladder to describe the “worst-off” households. Then the focus group is free to add however many steps to the ladder as needed to capture the different wellbeing groups—and their corresponding traits—which are present in the community. During these testimonies, the facilitator records key traits of each ladder step on a flipchart for the

group. Most ladders for the GENNOVATE study featured three or four steps, although a few had more steps.

Once the ladder steps are complete, the focus group then identifies the step at which local households are no longer considered poor, or their “community poverty line.” Next, the group works together to sort on the different steps a pile of 20 seeds or stones (or similar material) that are representative of all the households in their community. The sorting exercise is then repeated to indicate the distribution 10 years ago.² The seed distribution is captured on the flipchart and in the field notes. Following this, the activity turns to discussions about the assets and capacities of farmers at the different steps and the experiences of women and men in their communities with moving up, getting stuck, or falling on their ladder. The findings from sorting the seeds provide the basis for generating a summary statistic [moving out of poverty = (share of poor 10 years ago – share poor now) ÷ (share poor 10 years ago)] to enable comparing perceptions of poverty dynamics across the focus groups and other research communities sampled. A positive summary statistic indicates perceived poverty reduction.



² Narayan and Petesch (2005 and 2010) review procedures for sorting of and data analysis from a randomized list of local households.

Field research needs for effective application

Sensitive human subject data. The module generates potentially sensitive information about community members and circumstances, and ethical research and informed consent protocols need to be applied.

Field team composition and training. The tool calls for a four-member field team of two facilitators (one of each sex) and two notetakers (ditto). This enables only women or men to be present during each focus group conducted. Skilled facilitators are needed who are experienced with varied techniques for fomenting inclusive focus group dynamics. Notetakers are responsible for complete narrative and numerical documentation of the field notes. A practical field-based training led by a master trainer who has direct experience with conducting the Ladder of Life is strongly recommended.³

Focus group composition. In each community, two sex-specific focus groups should be convened, and each group should be composed of eight to 10 members (ages 30 to 55) from the poor socioeconomic group of their community. GENNOVATE protocols also required most focus group members to be significantly engaged in agricultural livelihoods.

Specification of geographic area. It is important to ensure that focus group members share a common understanding of their community's boundaries. Is it the physical living area of the village? A smaller hamlet or barrio of the village or town? It is not recommended that the geographic area cover a large territory or population group such as a large town.

Strengthening of recall. To assist focus group members with remembering the past, references in the interview guide to "10 years ago" should be substituted with a fixed year (e.g. 2009) and a commonly known national or local event that occurred roughly a decade ago, such as a major election, natural disaster, end of a conflict, or completion of new school or other infrastructure project.

Adaptations of the tool. Box 1 presents the GENNOVATE interview guide for the tool, which includes a set of additional questions about agricultural capacities at the different ladder steps. Alternatively, focus groups might evaluate food production and dietary practices at the different steps. In a recent evaluation of a cash transfer program, focus groups assessed the share of households below (and above) the poverty line that they perceived to be receiving the cash transfers in their community.

Box 1. Ladder of Life, Focus Group Interview Guide

[Read:] Now we will discuss the different types of people who live in your village, and do an activity called the Ladder of Life. This activity is designed to provide a general picture of the different wellbeing groups that live in the village. We will also explore how and why some individuals and households here are able to get ahead—and also how and why people sometimes struggle and fall back.

1. First I would like you to tell me about local people at the top step. How would you describe the men and women who are the best off of the village? How do they live? How can you tell that a person or household is the best off?

[Facilitation notes: Please be sure to discuss the boundaries of the village or hamlet for this activity if there is any uncertainty about the population group that will be captured by the ladder. The traits elicited by this activity should be characteristic of local people (e.g., if a focus group member relates how the best off have other homes in the city, then inquire openly whether there are men and women of their village with two homes). If necessary, please remind the focus group to consider just the traits and experiences of people who live in the village presently. At this early stage in the ladder exercise, it is preferable not to introduce prompts that may bias this discussion. The objective is to first learn about the markers of status that are of local importance. But if characteristics of the step are not flowing freely from the group, perhaps inquire how people on this step would be living, the types of homes and other property they have, their level of self-confidence, ways they earn a living, their education, the types of relationships they have with family members and others in the community, the different places they go, and so forth. Additional characteristics will emerge from later discussions, and these should be added to the relevant steps throughout the exercise.]

2. Next, we will move all the way down to the very bottom step, which we'll call step 1. How would you describe the people here who live at the bottom—or the worst off in the community? What is a person's life like who is on the bottom step or step 1?
3. Let's move on. What about people who are on the step just above the people who are at the bottom? How would you describe individuals and households here at step 2?

³ If needed, reach out to Patti Petesch (patti@pattipetesht.com) or Lone Badstue (l.badstue@cgiar.org) for recommendations of master trainers from the region where your study will take place.

4.	Now, let's move up from step 2. Does this community have a step between step 2 and the highest step? [If so] How would people living on step 3 be described?																			
	<i>[Keep inquiring about additional steps until the best off on the top step is reached. Once the ladder visual is complete, number each of the steps so that step 1 is the bottom step or worst off. Numbering the steps will make the following discussion easier.]</i>																			
5.	Okay, now I would like you to recall the community 10 years ago. Would we need to add a new step to the top or bottom? Or would we need to remove a step?																			
	<i>[If a new step is required, please add the step and document the characteristics. Do not change the traits of any of the existing steps; merely note the differences in the earlier period on the flipchart and in the notes. If another step at the bottom is added for 10 years ago, please label this step 1, and relabel the other steps above it step 2, 3, 4 and so forth. The bottom step should always be step 1 so as not to confuse the group or the comparative analysis later. Also, please do not create a separate ladder for 10 years ago.]</i>																			
6.	What is the step or category of the ladder where people in this village are no longer considered poor today? [Please be sure to note this on the ladder by drawing a line and labeling it as the "community poverty line."]⁴																			
7.	Next, let's get a rough sense of where people in this village are on the ladder. To make this easier, let's say that these 20 seeds represent all the households in the community. Let's begin with the step where the most households would be—which step is that and what share of the 20 seeds should we place there to represent the households on that step in the community?																			
	<i>[Continue until all 20 seeds are sorted for the present period. However, there are many possibilities for managing this sorting activity. The facilitator can initiate the sorting by first asking which step is the most populous and then the share that belongs there; and then identify the next most populous step and the share that belongs there, and so forth. A more effective way to do this is to invite a volunteer from the FGD to take over and distribute the 20 seeds on the ladder. If the FGD member is working independently, the facilitator can help to stimulate a more inclusive process by asking other members of the FGD whether they agree with the distribution or would like to propose changes. Keep inviting comments on the distribution of the seeds until the group has reached a consensus.]</i>																			
8.	What share of the 20 seeds would you place on each step to represent the households of this community 10 years ago? <i>[Repeat sorting activity for ten years ago.]</i>	<table> <tr> <th>Steps</th><th>Distribution today</th><th>Distribution 10 years ago</th></tr> <tr> <td>4</td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr> <td>3</td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr> <td>2</td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr> <td>1</td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr> <td>Total</td><td>20</td><td>20</td></tr> </table>	Steps	Distribution today	Distribution 10 years ago	4			3			2			1			Total	20	20
Steps	Distribution today	Distribution 10 years ago																		
4																				
3																				
2																				
1																				
Total	20	20																		
	<i>[Notetakers: please be sure to document the seed sorting and community poverty line in the table provided to the right. Add rows as necessary to the table, and draw a line right beneath the step at which households are no longer considered to be poor.]</i>																			
9.	What are the reasons for the change [or lack of change] in poverty levels in your village?																			
10.	Now I would like to get a better picture of each step today. What types of agricultural tools and other resources would a [sex of FGD] have or use on step 1? And what types of agricultural knowledge would they have? <i>[Repeat the questions on resources and knowledge for each of the steps below the poverty line and for the step just above the poverty line.]</i>																			
	11. What kinds of individuals, groups, or institutions could a [sex of FGD] on step 1 turn to for advice and support for their agricultural activities? <i>[Repeat the question for each of the steps below the poverty line and for the step just above the poverty line.]</i>																			
11.	Now let's return to the topic of new agricultural practices a little bit. How might a [sex of FGD] on step 1 use [the leading new agricultural practice for the sex of the FGD in the table above OR the innovation of interest in the research]? <i>[Repeat this question for each ladder step.]</i>																			

⁴ It is important to document clearly in the field notes the step # at which households are no longer considered poor.

Factors that Cause Movement Up, Down, and Stagnation

[Read:] Now we're going to focus on how individuals and their households move out of poverty. For this discussion, we are going to look separately at what poor men and poor women have been able to do in this village to climb the ladder and improve the wellbeing of their households.



Ladder of Life exercise with a man's focus group, Bangladesh. GENNOVATE fieldwork. Photo: Anuprita Shukla.

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12. How have the men from this community moved their household from below to above the community poverty line?

[If there are strong differences in the ladder steps below the poverty line, it may be useful for the FGD to consider separately how men climb up from each of the steps below the poverty line. But please be sure in the notes to indicate the factors related to climbing up from step 1 to 2, or from step 2 to 3, and so forth.]

13. How have women from this community moved their households from below to above the community poverty line? *[Again, it may be useful to consider how women climb up each of the steps below the poverty line; and please specify this clearly in the notes.]*

14. Now let's talk about households below the poverty line that have not been able to move up the ladder. What are some reasons why a man becomes trapped at these steps and cannot find a way up and out of poverty?

15. And a woman? What are some reasons why a woman remains trapped in poverty in your village?

16. Next, let's focus on how households that have fallen from above to below the poverty line. What factors have led to men and their households falling into poverty?

17. And women? What factors have led to women and their households falling into poverty?

18. In this community, where can people turn, or what can they do, so they are better able to avoid falling down the ladder in times of hardship?

[Some probing may be necessary to elicit a rich response and be sure to probe into whether there are gender differences in access to/use of such resources. Help during hard times may (or may not) be available from family or relatives, moneylenders, social programs, employers, community organizations, remittances, savings, insurance, other types of assets, and so forth. Community institutions may also be important, including patronage and religious charity.]

19. In what ways does a woman in this village support her husband's efforts to get ahead? And in what ways does a man support his wife's efforts to get ahead? *[If community with polygamy, could also ask: In what ways do co-wives and their husbands support one another's initiatives to get ahead?]*

20. In what ways do couples in this village sometimes make it harder for one another's efforts to get ahead? *[If community with polygamy, could also ask: In what ways do co-wives or their husbands sometimes make it harder for one another to get ahead?]*

Source: Petesch, Badstue and Prain (2017, pp. 63-68).

Selected fieldnotes from a poor women's focus group: Badero, Ethiopia, GENNOVATE dataset

Box 2 reproduces the Ladder of Life from a poor women's focus group conducted in Badero (pseudonym), a village of the Amhara region in Ethiopia. Below are additional illustrations from the fieldnotes.

- **How have the men from this community moved their household from below to above the community poverty line?**

P8: There are people who climb from the lower step to the top. These people work as daily laborers and take credit; with the money, men mostly start to sharecrop while women buy chickens or sheep to generate income. They save money and also engage in meetings about agriculture.

P3: Those who are able to use land properly, add to their land by renting and also working hard. They can climb from step to step, especially those who are from step three onwards can move up. These people plant different crops and engage in vegetable farming and animal fattening. They do not depend on these but also work in some other types of work including laborers in construction sites either in the village or in town. They do not drink away their hard work but save.

P2: I know a young person who had no land but buys produce from the farmers and goes to Addis Ababa to sell it. And now he has built a beautiful house, bought oxen and cows, started renting land, and entered share farming. He worked hard and his life changed a lot.

- **How have women from this community moved their households from below to above the community poverty line?**

P6: Some climb the ladder by working hard and some get lucky and receive an inheritance. Nowadays, thanks to our government, there are savings and credit schemes that help us if we are strong enough to generate income. [facilitator: why did you say that?] Because there are some women who can't plan and do business and who are unable to pay back the loan; and some men take the credit and drink or spend the money on their mistresses.

P7: For example, I was divorced and shared my land with my children, and I couldn't move further. Later I started working as a daily laborer and with the income I bought a small cow. Then with the milk I got from it, I started selling butter and I also started raising poultry. And now I am better and still farming the land that I have left.

P1: For example, I lost all my cattle and I got two lambs from a credit scheme. I have land which is near the river and with it I planted onion and I got very good income, with which I bought a cow and an ox. Now I farm my land renting only one ox. Or, I exchange [my ox] with others.

Ladder of Life contextual and comparative analysis

Badstue et al. (2017, pp. 14-17) present a case study of Badero that draws from the Ladder of Life discussions and other GENNOVATE data. For additional analysis with Ladder of Life data, from Tanzania, see Petesch et al. (2017, pp. 13-14). In both case studies, women's and men's ladder testimonies are analyzed and presented separately and compared. This enables a meaningful gender analysis of normative and other influences on perceptions of wellbeing and of opportunities for and barriers to movements out of poverty (continues on page 8).



Box 2. Ladder of Life, Poor women's focus group, Badero, Ethiopia

- Step 5**
- "These people have 3-4 ha of land holdings, 30-40 cattle, have a better house. Compared to others, their wife and kids look good and are dressed well. They feed the family throughout the year, own grinding mill/shop, they lend money, have a horse for their own transportation."
 - "Even if they do own a small plot of land of their own they hire/rent to plow or share farm land. They are very active in income generation and they respect whatever they have and also would not be selective about work, they even get involved in something that brings decent salary."
 - "Their house is peaceful and the children are happy. This is because both the husband and the wife work and are engaged in productive activities, not in drinking or spreading rumors."
- Step 4**
- "Here these people have 2-3 hectares of land holdings, rent land to gain more income, have 2-3 oxen and cows. His wife has chickens, they have some money in the bank. He is elected as community leader and lends money to others."
 - "These people can also be hired by the government. They have monthly income and the wife is a farmer. She takes care of the land and the house, while they work on their job. They are better educated as compared to other community members. They are listened to because of their position and they send their children to school preferably in town. They may have another house in town. They are well known because they are serving the community in the offices."
- Step 3**
- "These people have 1 ha or less of land holdings. They are share farmers. They work as daily laborers, have one ox."
 - "Divorced or widowed women who have a small plot of land and hire laborers or give the land for shared farming are also here."
 - "There are also women who have land, give it out for rent or shared farming and depend on other men who may be married to get more income. They may sell "areke" from their house as income generating scheme."
 - "The women own chickens. Children go to school. They feed the family most of the year except for the time of food shortage and own all traditional farm equipment."

COMMUNITY POVERTY LINE

- Step 2**
- "They have no land holdings. They do not handle their family properly. Children can go to school but they are unhealthy. They work as daily laborers hired on other's farms."
 - "They are unhappy and think that they are escaping their misery by drinking. They are not trustworthy to give responsibility. So even if they are hired, they may soon get fired."
 - "Those who have no cattle or even chickens. These people live from hand to mouth."
- Step 1**
- "Have no farmland, may be handicapped, beggars, who depend on handouts from others, they may go around people's houses to collect food, etc."
 - "These persons are not respected and don't interact with others."
 - "They are unable to work because of different reasons including laziness."
 - "They are also unhappy, and have no hope. They think the rich are bad people who have some kind of magic to get to where they are now."
 - "They have no house or if they do, the house is very dilapidated and their wife is so miserable and looks destitute and hungry all the time. The children are not happy and may be straying all over the village rather than going to school."
 - "Because of the policy to keep children in school, their children would be enrolled to school, but are always hungry and find it hard to focus. They would not continue their education because they lack support and the family has no means to support them."

Source: Badstue et al., 2017, p. 15.

In addition to in-depth work, the Ladder evidence also enables comparative analysis. For example, table 1 displays the household (seed) distribution and 22 percent decline in poverty perceived by the Badero women's focus group. Below the table is the formula for calculating the moving out of poverty summary statistic, which can be used for comparing perceptions of poverty trends across focus groups and communities. While it is not possible to compare the ladders directly, as the numbers and traits of individual steps vary from focus group to focus group, it is possible to make broad comparisons of the trends observed. Additionally, comparative analysis is possible with the narrative data, for instance, on factors frequently observed to shape mobility on the ladder (e.g., Badstue et al, 2017, pp. 17-18; Petesch et al, pp. 11-13).

Table 1. Distribution of seeds representing village households, women's focus group, Badero, Ethiopia (source: GENNOVATE data).

Step #	Distribution today	Distribution 10 years ago
5	1	1
4	5	8
3	7	2
Community poverty line		
2	5	6
1	2	3
Total	20	20

[moving out of poverty = (share poor 10 years ago – share poor now) ÷ (share poor 10 years ago)]

$$.22 = (.45 - .35) \div .45$$

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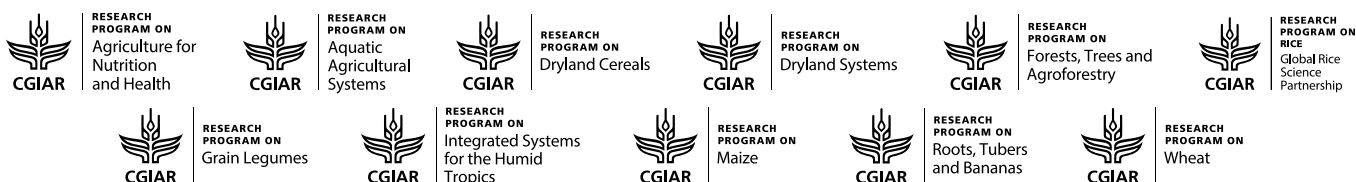
<http://gender.cgiar.org/themes/gennovate/>

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The portfolio of CGIAR Research Programs has changed since 2017, please see [here](#).

Selected literature on Ladder of Life

Methodology

Petes, P., Badstue, L. and Prain, G. (2018) 'Gender norms, agency, and innovation in agriculture and natural resource management: The GENNOVATE methodology', Mexico, D. F.: CIMMYT.

Narayan, D. and Petesch, P. (2005) Moving Out of Poverty: Understanding Freedom, Democracy, and Growth from the Bottom Up—Methodology Guide. Washington, DC: Poverty Reduction Group, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network, World Bank Group.

Narayan, D., and P. Petesch. 2010. *Moving Out of Poverty: Rising from the Ashes of Conflict*. Vol. 4. New York and Washington, DC: Palgrave Macmillan and World Bank Group, pp. 490-496.

Analyses that draw from GENNOVATE dataset

Badstue, L., Petesch, P., Williams, G. and Umantseva, A., with Daniela Moctezuma (2017) *Gender and innovation processes in wheat-based systems*. GENNOVATE Report to the CGIAR Research Program on Wheat. GENNOVATE Research Paper. Mexico, D. F.: CIMMYT.

Petes, P., Badstue, L., Williams, G., Farnworth, C. and Umantseva, A. (2017) *Gender and innovation processes in maize-based systems*. GENNOVATE report to the CGIAR Research Program on Maize. GENNOVATE Research Paper. Mexico, D.F.: CIMMYT.