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Investigating poverty : an example from Tanzania

Sheila Smith and John Sender

Investigating the dynamics of rural differentiation and class formation were at the forefront of our research in Lushoto District, Tanga Region, Tanzania in 1986. But precisely because of our focus on differentiation and class formation among households, we were careful to devise techniques of reaching households which might be omitted if we relied on local people's answers to questions concerning poverty and wealth.

Initial contacts between outside researchers and local people tend to be with the most articulate, educated, politically influential, etc. but in addition, in Tanzania the prevailing ideology has created a negative attitude towards practices such as labour hiring, which are known to be widespread. So when a wealthy farmer was asked to provide names of people who were regularly employed on his farm, he was very likely to send us to a house inhabited by a relative. The relative was invariably poorer than him, but also invariably employed wage labourers herself/himself, and certainly had never worked as a casual manual agricultural wage worker. The degree of social, and to some extent physical isolation of the poorest people, became obvious as soon as we devised a way of locating them: they had no contact with agricultural extension services, they did not attend meetings, etc.

In fact, one of our assistants, a nurse who was in charge of the MCH Clinic in the area, and had lived and worked in the area for a number of years, was appalled at the level of material deprivation experienced by many of the people we interviewed. She herself had no contact with them, since they were precisely the people who did not attend the clinic. Since the pattern of habitation is very scattered along mountainous ridges, we frequently walked

long distances from the road to arrive at the houses of people to interview.

The most effective means of locating the poorest people turned out to be via the primary schools. Since primary education is compulsory from age seven to fourteen, the schools are supposed to have a comprehensive list of school age children. Most children do attend some part of Standard One, but there is a very serious problem of absenteeism. Discussions with Headmasters (sic) and with the District Education Officer indicated that the problem became particularly severe during Standard Three, because of the requirement that parents buy exercise books and pens. Both the opportunity cost of children's labour time and the direct cost of their attending school were considerable: not only did parents have to buy exercise books and pens, but school uniforms were compulsory. The cost of a school uniform was 300 Tanzanian Shillings, approximately 2 weeks' pay for a fulltime estate tea plucker earning the minimum wage.

It was anticipated that the problem of absenteeism would be directly related to the problem of poverty, and that absentee school children and/or their parents were likely to be working as agricultural wage labourers. We chose four primary schools in the area which were regarded as having the worst attendance records, and we examined the attendance registers for Standards Three and Six. Children who were absent from either of these two standards on a total of more than 50 percent of the school days since January 1986 were selected, and a sample of these children's parents were interviewed. As anticipated, a very high proportion (80 per cent) of these children's parents, their siblings or co-residents were employed as casual agricultural wage labourers. (It must be noted that some

Headmasters tried to subvert this methodology, by sending us to houses of children who were clearly not habitual absentees!).

Other methods of finding the poorest people turned out to be less successful, in particular the attempt to contact the mothers of malnourished children as recorded at the MCH. As noted above, the women who attended the MCH were clearly in receipt of incomes far above the level received by the poorest. Furthermore, those who were working for a daily wage to provide the evening meal could not afford to spend the time walking to the clinic and back, since it would mean not eating that day.

Having located the poorest by following up the parents of absentee schoolchildren, it became clear very quickly what types of possessions people strove to acquire as soon as they could possibly afford them. The poorest people were materially destitute, mobilising all their resources to provide an evening meal. The types of personal possessions and types of houses which distinguished the not-so-poor from the destitute were arrived at by a process of successive approximation, and our questionnaire went through five or six revisions from a checklist to a fully developed questionnaire.

Altogether we interviewed 100 households, and each interview involved detailed information on every resident, and every child and spouse of every resident. As well as interviewing the poorest households, we attempted to interview the richest, but locating the richest and largest landowners is a much easier task than locating the poorest. The analysis of poverty was undertaken on the basis of a Possessions Score, involving information on the following items:

- Metal roof
- Non-mud walls
- Watch
- Light
- Radio
- Bicycle
- Number of pairs of shoes
- Number of rooms
- Number of beds

- Number of mattresses
- Number of chairs
- Number of stools
- Number of coats
- Number of sweaters

The selection was also guided by previous work in the area, particularly by Fleuret (1978). The items clearly constituted major improvements in people's well-being: the climate is frequently cold and wet, so the possession of a roof that does not leak or the ownership of a sweater or a coat or a pair of shoes was regarded as essential, by those who possessed them as well as those who did not.

The Possessions Score was used instead of any measure of income as an indicator of socio-economic status, and it turned out to be very closely correlated with a wide range of other factors: ownership of land, animals: use of purchased inputs; contact with extension services; access to education, health facilities and high-status non-agricultural employment; and political status, as indicated by political positions held by household members.

This has been a very brief glimpse of a much larger piece of work. The research has been written up as a book, and will be published by Routledge in mid-1989 as *Economic Development in Rural Tanzania: Poverty, Class and Gender in the Usambaras*. In addition three papers have been submitted to journals, details forthcoming in later editions of RRA Notes when publication dates etc. are known.

- **Sheila Smith**, School of African and Asian Studies, University of Sussex, **John Sender**, African Studies Centre, University of Cambridge.

REFERENCE

- Fleuret, P. 1978. *Farm and Market: A Study of Society and Agriculture in Tanzania*. PhD Thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara.