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RRA for local government planning in northern Nigeria

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· Introduction

The Development Administration Group, University of Birmingham, in collaboration with the Department of Local Government Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, is presently engaged in a five year training project in project planning and management for local government officers in the northern states of Nigeria. During the first year of this project (1989-90), it has designed and helped to run three project planning courses for a total of 76 heads of different local government departments (community development, agriculture and health) and training officers from the State Departments of Local Government Affairs. As such, we have trained representatives from about one quarter of all 300 or so local governments in the northern states of Nigeria.

One operational objective of these planning courses was to promote the generation of a poverty focussed grass roots information base through the application of RRA techniques. Course participants were therefore introduced to the philosophy and techniques of RRA, which they were subsequently expected to pass on to their extension staff. They were given a framework with which to generate initial checklists for subsequent use during course fieldwork. They were also familiarised with and asked to prepare some diagrams which could prove useful for project planning purposes, such as maps, seasonal calendars, transacts, historical profiles and impact diagrams. Finally, they were introduced to the poverty identification exercise, which was practised in mock workshop sessions.

The poverty identification exercise constituted the first fieldwork exercise and was also used

as a purposive sampling technique to selecting the households to be visited. The sectoral checklists prepared were then applied by multi disciplinary teams in five villages of each of the three host local governments, in individual/household, group and community settings. Diagrams were also prepared by pairs of officers with small groups of villagers. Fieldwork reports were prepared on the basis of the information obtained during ten days of discussions and exercises and individual personal action plans were also developed, indicating to training team in Zaria, how each participant intended to train their extension staff in the philosophy and techniques of RRA. These personal action plans were seen as a crucial mechanism for replication of the training down to the operational level.

Both the fieldwork reports and personal action plans were then presented to local government secretaries, sole administrators and councillors, as well as state department officials at a two day follow up workshop. The purpose of this workshop was to seek support for the implementation of these plans, as well as to discuss the implications of attempting to institutionalise RRA practices within Nigerian local government. The implementation of these plans has subsequently been monitored three times by the project team based in Zaria. These follow up visits have revealed many problems with our efforts to institutionalise RRA in Nigerian local government. Before going into these, however, we would first like to itemize the positive achievements of our training efforts.

• **Project achievements**

- The local government officers trained so far are interested in and receptive to the philosophy and techniques of RRA.
- The officers concerned are also enthusiastic about applying these techniques in villages within their local governments.
- About one third of the local government officers we trained (25) have now trained their extension staff in RRA.
- Similarly, two of the nine state training officers have trained further local government officers from their states in RRA. Two others are planning to do so in the near future.
- Those state and local government officials that have attended follow up workshops or that have been visited by our monitoring team in Zaria, have all responded favourably to the idea of RRA and the personal action plan as a mechanism for its institutionalisation. This has been reflected in the continued sponsorship of our courses and the financial support given to the subsequent participant training efforts at the state and local government levels.
- Most of the project planning course participants who have now also attended our follow on courses in project management continue to be very enthusiastic about RRA and what we are trying to achieve, despite the many obstacles which many of them have faced in trying to implement their personal action plans over the last eighteen months. The most important of these are outlined below.

• **Problems encountered**

- Most of our course participants continue to think of villagers as backward.
- Many of them still have a poor understanding of RRA philosophy and techniques, as well as how these apply to project planning. The application of RRA

methods during our course fieldwork exercises failed to break through the common practice of villagers defining their needs according to what they knew local government traditionally provided. Combined with the problem of a general lack of probing, this led to the generation of superficial information about village problems and opportunities.

- Serious distortions have therefore taken place in participant's efforts to train extension staff. Furthermore, neither course fieldwork nor subsequent efforts by some participants and their extension staff to apply RRA methods have managed to initiate any process of participatory RRA within the villages concerned.
- The relatively few extension staff that have been trained do generally not appear to have applied RRA methods subsequent to their course and fieldwork training by their heads of departments. As such, the operational objective of generating a grass roots information base has yet to be realised.
- Lack of political and financial support has also severely restricted the amount of training that has taken place so far. Heads of departments are not taken seriously as trainers (or project planners) by their superior officers, nor do they see themselves as trainers or planners. This lack of support can be attributed to the poor attendance of senior local government staff and politicians at our follow up workshops and the lack of follow-up contact with these people by the project team and the state departments.

These particular problems, which are directly linked at our training effort, are aggravated by a number of other obstacles to institutionalisation, which are discussed below.

• **Obstacles to institutionalisation**

- Dialogue with villagers in northern Nigeria is mediated through the traditional village and district heads. Many villagers will not even talk to local government officials without the prior

approval of the traditional authorities, who are usually represented at any village level discussions. In addition, extension staff and other local government officials also tend to limit their dialogue to a limited number of influential villagers when such dialogue does occur. Even then, these infrequent discussions tend to be superficial unstructured, in terms of project planning requirements.

- Lack of exposure to the philosophy and techniques of RRA by state department officials, councillors, senior local government officials and other heads of departments, as well as by village community development associations, district development associations and so on also prevents any widespread adoption of RRA methods, as does the general hierarchical nature of local government and prevailing attitudes towards the local population.
- More generally, the use of an RRA generated grass roots information base as a basis for participatory local level project planning within local government is likely to be constrained by the following additional factors, which determine present planning practices:
 - federal and state government policy priorities as laid down in 'call circulars' which are periodically sent governments;
 - federal and state directives to participate in certain projects or to implement certain projects on their behalf, with or without the help of specific grants;
 - the strong tradition of continuing to do what has been done the year before in the context of expected revenue and inflationary trends;
 - personal preferences of the heads of departments, in context of their knowledge and information, as well as bureaucratic politics and personal relationships with treasurer, secretary, sole administrator or chairman supervisory councillors;

- a constant infrastructure bias, which maximises the opportunities for contracting out and which minimises the need for contact with project beneficiaries;
- political pressures brought to bear on chairmen and councillors (as well as on secretaries and sole administrators) by village and district heads (through the emirate council), village delegations, community development associations, task forces etc.;
- pressures by contractors on the head of works, treasurer and secretary, sole administrator or councillors;
- personal pressures from relatives and friends; and,
- in addition to these factors, extension staff are not seen as having important information collection functions, nor are heads of departments seen as project planners. This is hardly surprising in a situation where capital project expenditure typically does not exceed 10 or 20% of total local government expenditure, most of which goes on salaries and allowances.

All the above mentioned factors have implications for future training in RRA, which we have taken account of in the design of the next phase of project activities, described below.

• **Lessons for future training**

- More time has to be spent training local government officers in the philosophy and techniques of RRA, particularly in the development and application of checklists, greater use of the 'six helpers' and a better understanding of the operational significance of diagrammatic techniques and project planning oriented extension worker reports.
- More effort also needs to be made to encourage critical analysis and modification of our RRA materials. Our

RRA materials have been uncritically accepted during course work and mechanically applied during fieldwork so far.

- Similarly, more time and effort has to be spent encouraging on going participatory RRA by villagers themselves. This should become one of the future course fieldwork objectives.
- Future training will have to include an explicit training of trainers package to enable participant heads of departments to become effective trainers of their extension staff in RRA.
- The target audience for training also has to be widened. This will be done next year by developing teams of back up trainers consisting of the best of our ex-course participants and by decentralising future training to the state departments and local governments. Future monitoring and follow up support with the implementation of personal action plans will also be further decentralised with greater involvement of the back up training and monitoring teams.
- The best participants of these new field based training courses will also be trained at future training of trainer courses, so that state training teams can eventually cover all local governments in their states without the assistance of the present project team of trainers at Ahmadu Bello University.
- A new post course monitoring system will have to be devised, to analyse and resolve problems with the new phase of training, as well as to inform future project redesign.

We are confident that the incorporation of these lessons from experience to date will significantly improve the chances of successful institutionalisation of RRA in local government in northern Nigeria. However, the implementation and impact of this new training strategy will itself depend on a number of factors which are briefly examined below.

• Future prospects

The success of the proposed future training policy outlined above will depend on several factors:

- State and local government agreement in allowing their training officers and heads of departments to become trainers within and outside their own organisations. This represents a new role for these officers that will have to be added to their existing responsibilities.
- The ability of consultants and the project effectively train such future trainers.
- The development of local RRA materials, a good communications system and a post-course monitoring and evaluation structure that can feed back into the training project.

More importantly, any widespread application of RRA methods in local government in northern Nigeria will depend on the following additional changes:

- An acceptance by traditional village leaders of participatory RRA methods.
- An acceptance by councillors and senior local government officials of the legitimacy of a grassroots information base generated in this way, as a base for project formulation, selection and approval.
- Acknowledgement and respect of the planning responsibilities of extension staff, sectional heads and operational departmental heads.
- An acceptance at state and federal levels of a greater level of local government autonomy in formulating policy priorities and associated local government projects and programmes.
- Increased revenue for capital project expenditure, as well as for the costs of the project planning process itself.

We believe that a larger and more effective training programme can generate a

momentum, which will induce many of the required changes outlined above. The only major longer term constraints upon which training is likely to have relatively little impact are what levels of resources and autonomy future civilian federal and state governments in Nigeria are prepared to accord to local government. However, continued uncertainty about these questions should not stop us from continuing our efforts at introducing the philosophy and methods of RRA into Nigerian local government, as a basis for more participative local level development planning in the future.

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