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Beyond chapatis

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• The problem

The RRA show appears to be dominated by biologists and geographers, who are good at explaining the relationships between human activities and different aspects of the physical environment, but weaker when it comes to exploring connections between people themselves. These human relationships become particularly important when we start to think about things like participation or adaptive local level planning.

This note identifies what RRA already has to offer in this respect, and asks whether we might be able to devise some new diagrams, or borrow some old ones from anthropology, which could extend the repertoire.

It is almost entirely speculative. None of the ideas have actually been tested in the field; nor even discussed with anyone else¹. It also reflects my Asia bias, although I have tried to draw on examples from other regions.

• Economic relationships

Let's start with economic relationships. Here we must presently rely upon two devices which offer only hints of what might be going on. The first is the stacked bar chart (Figure 1), which shows how the composition of asset holdings changes as we move up the economic hierarchy. The illustration here looks at different types of land, but you will probably already be familiar with other variations. These convey a sense of who might potentially be able to participate directly in activities built

around assets of different kinds. The second device is wealth ranking, which offers insights of a similar nature. Neither bar charts nor wealth rankings say anything about the relationships that might arise from differences in asset holdings. Furthermore, they tell us little about the power which certain people will enjoy as a result or the way in which that power might be used to impose restrictions upon others.

We might, for example, have a situation where villagers with little land of their own rely exclusively upon one relatively wealthy patron for all of their employment opportunities (Figure 2), and therefore have to listen very carefully to what that person has to say about what they may or may not do. On the other hand, poorer people may be able to tap multiple sources of employment (Figure 3), in which case they are likely to enjoy much more freedom of manoeuvre.

If we look not only at employment, but also consider sources of credit or opportunities to secure the temporary use of land under some form of tenancy arrangement, the same sort of possibilities might arise (Figure 4). Poor clients may be locked into a highly constrained "multi-stranded" relationship with one powerful patron. Others may find themselves in a much more fluid set of market relations.

¹ Except Jenny McCracken, to whom I am grateful for some helpful suggestions.

Figure 1. Stacked bar chart (top)
 Figure 2. Patron-client labour relationship (middle)
 Figure 3. Market based labour relations (bottom)

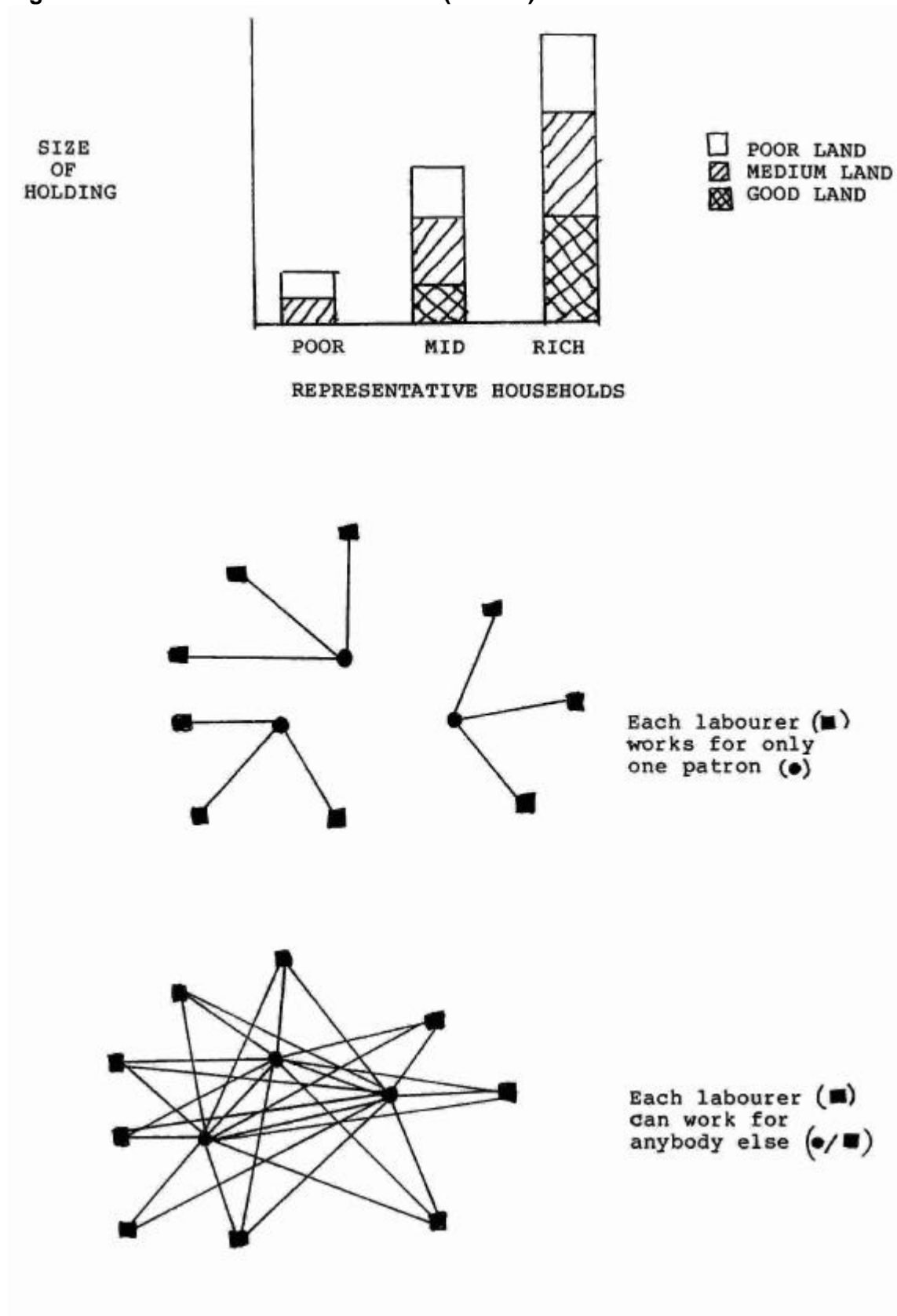


Figure 4. Single stranded and multiplex relations

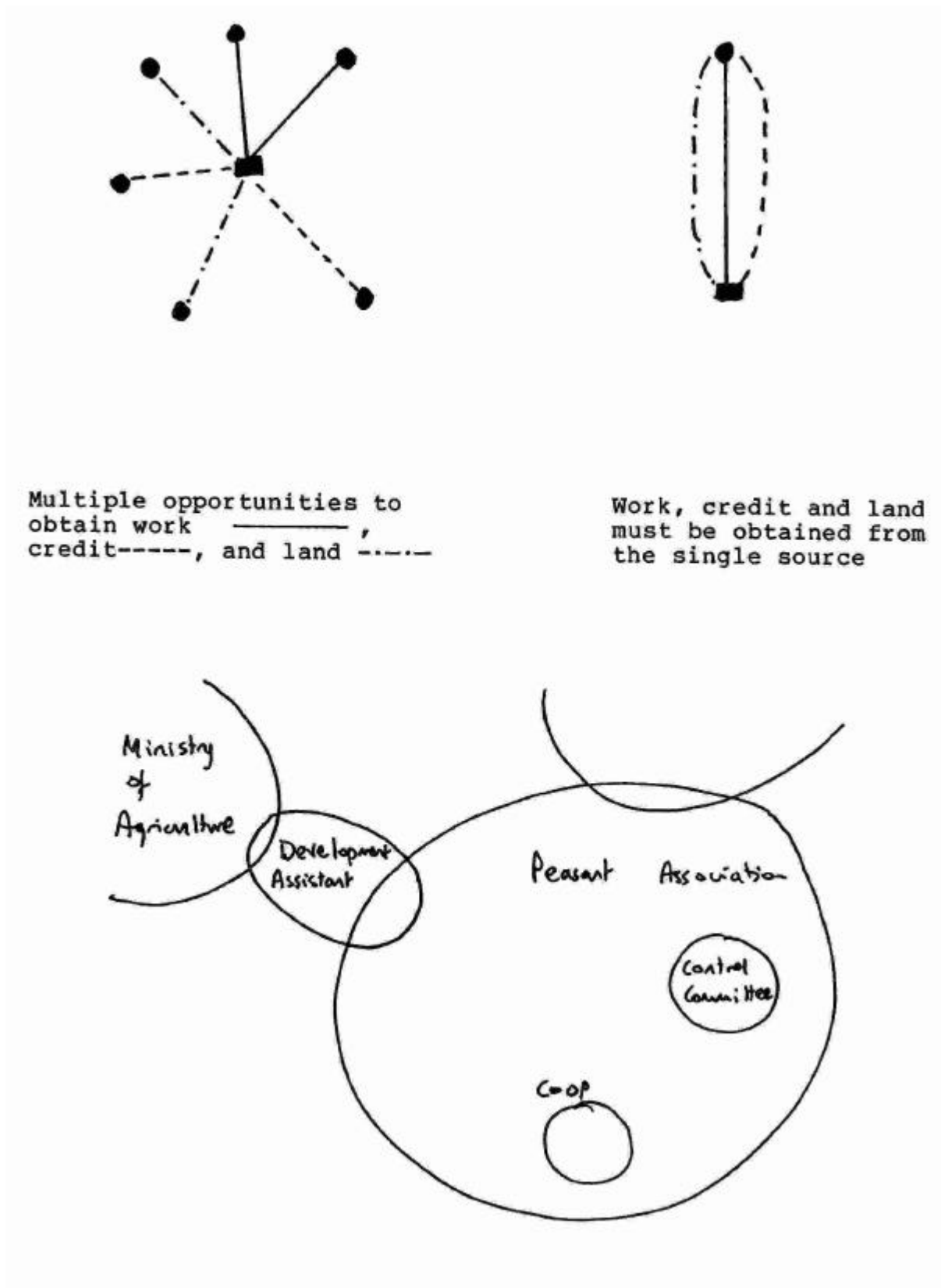


Figure 5. The 'humble' chapati

Figure 6. Inclusion and exclusion through genealogies

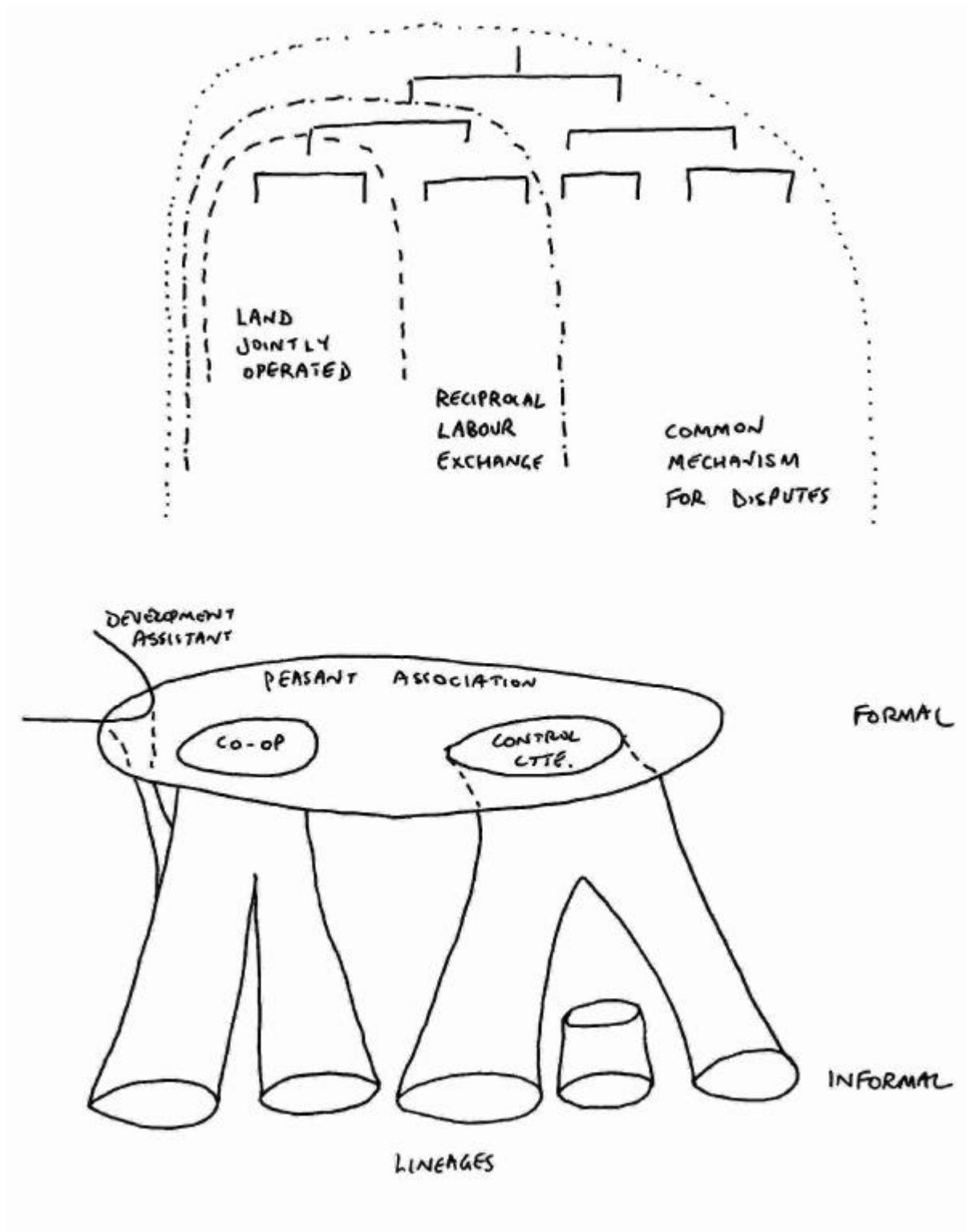


Figure 7. Linking formal and informal institutions

Anthropologists are accustomed to drawing diagrams of these kinds, but would it be possible for them to be used in a participatory fashion? They would, probably be very difficult to do “cold”, but perhaps coming after a wealth ranking they might sometimes work quite well.

• **Social relationships**

RRA is also rather weak when it comes to social relationships². The humble ‘chapati’ (Figure 5) has its uses, but still tells only part of the story. By focusing on formal institutions, it gives some sense of who is presently associated with whom, and therefore of who might work together effectively in future. But much more may be going on below the surface.

This takes us into the territory of informal or social institutions, most of which are likely to take kinship as their basic building blocks. A classic genealogy (Figure 6) will be comprehensible to at least some village people and might work as a device for eliciting information about the types of co-operation which already operate at different levels in a system. A more abstract formulation, with the same relationships expressed through a series of concentric circles, might sometimes be useful for purposes of presentation outside the village.

As in the earlier examples, it may be difficult to start with a genealogy, but given the degree of overlap between social and economic relationships, a discussion of the latter might itself provide a good lead-in. So, too, could the wealth ranking.

It will also frequently be the case that key social relationships will be reflected in the spatial configuration of communities. Where this applies, a map, of the type of which is often already produced (see Mascarenhas & Prem Kumar, this issue) might provide a good starting point. It could also be used to create a better picture of the resources controlled by different groups.

Once a picture of the underlying social relations has been established, it might finally prove possible to link the informal and formal together. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) attempted something of this kind in their “Net” of families showing function links, kinship links, marriage links plus notes about who held positions of power in formal institutions. Another option would be to turn the chapati on its side (Figure 7). Then we could see who the formal institutions really work for, and identify those whose interests may not be reflected on this level at all.

This, and the preceding exercise, would only work where populations were relatively stable. In urban settings, or in rural areas affected by high levels of migration, there would still be networks (as in the economic diagrams), but these would be less likely to be attached to a base of traditional social institutions.

I haven’t said anything about gender relations, although RRA is weak in this area as well. I hope to contribute a piece on this subject to RRA Notes soon.

• **Conclusion**

Will the new diagrams be any use? They cover some potentially sensitive topics, and there is a danger that people will express a sense of what ought to be, rather than what actually is. Verification will be more difficult than is usual in RRA, and there may be a fine line between accuracy and intrusiveness. Moreover, what works in one place may not readily transfer elsewhere. Even if a good picture can be constructed we may not end up knowing much more about what will work than what would have “come out in the wash” in a community meeting. In spite of all this, I think these approaches can be useful additions to our present repertoire. Is there anybody willing to give them a try?

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² For a notable exception, see Robin Mearns on clans and disputes in Papua New Guinea, RRA Notes 7, and Mehreen Hosain, this issue.