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Applying the methods to a new context

David Thomas

• Introduction

I am attempting to put into practice what I learnt about PRA. In brief I am studying the effects of dams and drought on the fishery of a floodplain from a socio-economic perspective. The main dam was built nearly 20 years ago - and coincided more or less with a severe drought in the region and a trend in reduced rainfall that lasted throughout most of the 70s. In this first phase of the research I have been carrying out village surveys in a stratified random sample of 24 villages, to get some picture of the regional trends in impact and people's adaptation to it.

• Participatory mapping

I found participatory mapping to be problematic at the level of this village survey. I think that one reason for this is the highly dynamic and variable nature of the floodplain. I am interested in fishing resources, but the distribution of fishing sites and their productivity vary from year to year and also during the year. Places that are very dry now or that are being used to grow residual moisture cow-peas, will be under water in three month's time. This is not an insurmountable problem, but it does make mapping very complex.

Probably one way around this would be to draw a series of maps - for rainy season and dry season, and then for before the dams and for now. This is what I propose to do when I have selected villages for carrying out research at the level of the household. But for now, there is not time to draw four maps for every village I visit. I am realising that 'Rapid Rural Appraisal' methods are in actual fact anything but rapid! To explain what is required and to

give people time to carry out the mapping task and then to ask questions and add to and discuss the completed map is a very lengthy process.

• Ranking exercises

I have had most success with the ranking exercises. I have been getting the group to rank the relative importance of the main economic activities in the floodplain for their village, and also to score them. Doing this for the 'before' and 'after' situation I have built up a good picture of how the economy in different parts of the floodplain has responded to the changes. But quite apart from the usefulness of the results, I have been amazed by the transformation that occurs in the meeting when the exercise begins. To represent each production activity I have plastic bags containing samples of products or produce. As soon as I get them out everything changes from the rather sedate and disciplined interview that had gone before. The group is instantly animated, the bags are passed around with lots of laughter and comment and discussion. There follows an hour or two of heated debate and 100 per cent participation.

I tend to do the ranking half way through the meeting. You could draw a good graph of participation (or noise!) levels against time, which follows a gradual decline from the start of the meeting, then rises rapidly and reaches a peak during the ranking. The ranking has provided the point of departure for discussions on each of the activities concerned - the reasons for the changes that have taken place and their relative importance. I think that a lot of what I have discovered through this method will challenge much that has been written

about the economy of the floodplain and the impact of the dams.

- **Conclusion**

Some mixed results therefore, but generally I am very happy with the way things are going. Trying to apply participatory methods within the constraints and rigours required by a piece of 'academic' research was never going to be easy, but it seems to have gone very well. And anyway, I could not bear the thought of ticking boxes.

Most gratifying was the comment that I got as I left the last village that I visited. The village head remarked that they had received a visit two years ago from people who had asked them some questions, but that this time, with me, it had been a very different experience. I asked him what he meant by this. My interpreter had some difficulty translating the reply, but said that the village head had remarked that with the other people it had been a very 'heavy occasion', but with me they had enjoyed themselves.

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