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Rapid Rural Appraisal training for baseline data collection and target group identification

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• Introduction

Training in the use of rapid rural appraisal for baseline data collection and target group identification was recently conducted in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The training was undertaken as part of the Sulawesi Regional Development Project (SRDP), a joint venture between the Government of Indonesia and the Government of Canada, for which the University of Guelph acts as the Canadian executing agency. SRDP efforts focus on two major areas:

1. Strengthening and increasing the capabilities of planning agencies throughout Sulawesi.
2. Field projects addressing poverty alleviation in strategic areas of development to act as testing grounds for innovative approaches for rural development.

Nine trainees took part in the training, six drawn from government planning and sectoral agencies, and three from local non-governmental organisations. The six-week training exercise was designed and led by Tania Li, an anthropologist from Dalhousie University, Canada. As I was conducting research into training and the potential institutionalisation of RRA in Sulawesi at the time, it was possible for me to join the RRA team. I acted as observer and assistant trainer.

The training and data collection exercise had the following main objectives:

- To train a team of government and non-governmental development workers to apply RRA approaches, with the long-term

goal of preparing trainers for future RRA activities in the province.

- To conduct RRAs, and collect basic socio-economic data in three target villages in order to identify the poorest members of the population.
- To establish better criteria for identifying relative poverty in the various socio-environmental zones found in the target villages.
- To provide recommendations for refocusing programmes to better meet the needs of the rural poor in the target region.

Context

Training activities focused on Tinombo-Tomini-Moutong (TTM), an isolated cluster of villages located on the east coast of Central Sulawesi. The three target villages were chosen from 12 villages located in SRDP's Strategic Area of Development. TTM is located between two large and fairly successful transmigration areas along the coast. Narrow coastline gives way to miles of steep rolling mountains. 90 per cent of the population of TTM are farmers, most of whom work marginal lands. Much of the area has been deforested due to increased population and shifting cultivation practices. In recent years, farming has become increasingly difficult as decreasing soil fertility and the area's growing population place more pressure on the natural environment. The region is divided into three principal socio-environmental zones:

- the narrow coastal plain and foothills, this is the most 'developed' zone, serviced by a new road and most government ministries;

- the middle hills, which can be reached by hikes of two to four hours along footpaths only. Government services (health teams, formal education, agricultural extension) sporadically reach some middle hill populations; and,
- the inner hills, which can only be reached by four to twelve hour walks. Except for a few areas where missionaries are operating, most of the inner hill population remain beyond the present reach of government services.

• **The training**

Training involved four days of classroom activities, three weeks conducting RRAs in the villages, and about 16 days for data analysis and report writing. Classroom training covered the usual gamut of PRA/RRA topics (rationale, methods, attitudes and behaviour, preparation for fieldwork etc.). Approximately one week was spent conducting the RRA in each of the villages. The teams of trainees broke up into teams of five, each accompanied by local translators/research assistants, and guides to help find the way. Teams typically over-nighted in villages for two or three nights, then returned to a base camp to briefly review and discuss findings, refine and redirect their approach, and hold orientation meetings with members of the next target village. Since the use of RRA for basic data collection and target group identification was new to everyone on the team, the 'learning by doing' was all the more critical. A lot of fine-tuning and innovation was required along the way.

The target group identification strategy

A mixture of RRA and baseline data collection techniques were used to support target group identification. The team followed a set routine in the field:

- Collection of relevant secondary data;
- Participatory mapping for social and environmental data;
- Baseline data collection; and,
- Application of other RRA methods.

Secondary data was collected during orientation meetings held with villagers and

local representatives along the coast. During these meetings a sketch map of each village was constructed with the aid of villagers. This process not only acted as a good rapport-builder, but provided the team with a good overview of the sprawling villages so that sample areas and hiking routes could be chosen. During these introductory meetings, the RRA team ensured that villagers had a clear introduction to the team and our research objectives. In other words we told them who we were (and who we weren't!), why we'd come, and how we proposed to work. This establishment of trust between villagers and the team was a critical prerequisite for conducting the RRAs. Without such rapport, we would have been wasting our time in trying to collect valid socio-economic information.

For each of the more remote study sites, villagers were asked to hike to a central point in the hills to meet with the RRA team. After introductions, participatory mapping was used as an ice-breaker. Mapping was typically done on the ground using available sticks, rocks, leaves and so on as symbols. It was always enlightening and fun, and served several important purposes. It helped to orientate the team to land use patterns and local environmental conditions. It generated a list of households needed for the collection of basic socio-economic data, and to aid in the selection of key informants. In addition, the mapping provided a focus for discussion of local development problems, potentials and possible solutions.

Once the mapping was complete, the team conducted short interviews to collect basic baseline data. Data collected was based on a number of direct and indirect socio-economic indicators including:

- the number of active gardens maintained by a household;
- quantity and relative productivity of clove, cocoa and cashew trees;
- mode of access to land;
- ratio of adult farmers to dependents;
- adult literacy rates; and,
- percentage of children attending school.

A simple format was used as a guide for interviewing representatives from each household. Each interview took about 10

minutes and yielded an amazing amount of demographic and economic data. Villagers were surprisingly forthcoming, providing very specific economic data. We found it possible for teams of three to four people (including local helpers) to collect basic socio-economic data from 40-50 households in less than two hours. The validity of data collected during these interviews was later cross-checked against information yielded by wealth ranking and interviews with individual and focus groups of key informants. Interviews with women, single-parent families, and widows were used to cross-check quantitative data and help offset potential gender and poverty biases in data collection.

Most villagers could not spare a long time away from their fields or home. For this reason, some team members collected basic data while others conducted semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussion with key informants. Where possible, wealth-ranking and transect-drawing exercises were also carried out at the same time. Once the collection of basic socio-economic data was completed, a large group discussion was held to examine local development problems, potential and possible solutions. These discussions were generally very lively and provided good opportunities for probing and cross-checking. Team members spent the remainder of the day visiting households to conduct interviews, do wealth-ranking or work with villagers to construct transects and transition diagrams.

Results of the training process

Although physically demanding and fairly long in duration, the training was extremely well-received. All nine trainees commented on the depth and usefulness of learning they received over the six-week period. Positive attitudinal changes were perhaps the most apparent and far-reaching. For many of the trainees, the RRA exercise was their first 'off-road' investigation - this despite the fact that most team members had several years of experience working in development planning. A number of trainees were quite concerned about what we would find upon trekking into the hills. Questions like: "What will we eat?", and "Where will we stay and with whom?" abounded. The idea of hiking into an area

populated by 'slash-and-burn' animist peoples was intimidating to many. Indeed, more than once the team had been informed that the hill people "don't wear any clothes, and sleep in . . .". We never did see any evidence of such practices.

Once in the hills however, the team quickly developed a new respect and understanding for the inland agriculturalists. We realised that the age-old rotational farming practices used by locals were not implicitly devastating to the environment, and had for years allowed villagers to undertake a sustainable and productive form of agriculture on marginal and fragile soils. Population pressures had simply forced shorter fallow periods, and thus the onset of land degradation. We noted the remarkable data collection and analytical abilities of the team's locally-recruited research assistants (all of whom had only rudimentary formal education). Trainees likewise recognised the importance of collecting good qualitative and quantitative data, and validating and analysing that information with villagers.

All team members learned a great deal about the problems of rural development tourism and associated poverty biases. New skills such as how to conduct semi-structured interviews, work with villagers to construct transects, or do mapping and wealth-ranking were acquired. The process of analysing and inter-relating qualitative and quantitative data was new and fairly difficult for most team members. Trainees commented on the need for considerably more practice to reinforce skills in this area. All nine trainees expressed an interest in obtaining more training and opportunities for using RRA.

Results of target group identification strategy

Successes

The combination of short, formal surveying and exploratory RRA methods worked quite well. The following attributes were noted:

- A wealth of quantitative socio-economic data was complemented and informed by the broad-based qualitative data collected. This provided an important understanding

of environmental and economic transitions involving complex interactions between migration, cropping and land-use patterns, rainfall and soil fertility.

- Crucial information regarding livelihood strategies was likewise compiled, and locally-valid criteria for identifying relative poverty were generated, and found to be quite reliable.
- Problem-solving discussions with villagers, and supporting quantitative data helped to identify recommendation domains for particular agro-environmental zones. Less than a week after the team's presentation of findings two government ministries made last minute changes to programme funding proposals in order to accommodate locally-identified educational and extension needs.

Problem areas

Several weaknesses and problem areas were identified.

- The large amount of quantitative data yielded proved cumbersome. Too much time was spent organising, tabulating and cross-checking data. In fact, the team was caught a bit off guard. We had not expected to be able to collect so much basic data in so little time. After some experimentation however, the team decided to use simple data entry forms (for the more formal socio-economic data only). This simplified the organisation of data and helped with important in-field triangulation of information to check consistency, validity and reliability. To increase efficiency, future target group identification efforts may employ two field assistants. One team of locally-recruited workers will undertake participatory mapping and baseline data collection. This team will be followed by an RRA team who will verify information collected by the baseline data team, and conduct further exploratory RRA activities.
- Too much time was also spent writing detailed reports describing hamlets of 40-50 households. In 10 days, the team produced 22 hamlet-level reports and three village-level reports. While this afforded useful training opportunities, it was

repetitive, time-consuming and not very cost-effective. Village-level reports appear to offer sufficient detail and analysis, and helped to identify priority target areas and groups, and to generate programme recommendations and refinements.

- It is extremely important to explain clearly what RRA/PRA approaches can and cannot do. Our team communicated what RRA can do, but was probably not clear enough in outlining its limitations. While the exercise provided a great deal of valuable and reliable information, and important programme recommendations, some government officials expected the team to deliver detailed project proposals. The fact that good RRAs often require follow-up investigation and topical inquiries should have been stressed more, to avoid raising expectations and leading to disillusionment about RRA. This is especially important at a time when it is important to build up institutional confidence in the RRA/PRA approach.

• The potential for institutionalising RRA/PRA

Our team spent some time discussing whether or not RRA should be built into official planning procedures in Indonesia. A few of the key issues which emerged from this discussion are listed below.

- There is a need for more qualified trainers. This issue has been discussed before in *RRA Notes*. In Indonesia, relatively few potential RRA trainers exist. Although KEPAS, an organisation based in Java, has provided RRA training based on agro-ecosystems analysis to many rural development workers, more trainers promoting more types of RRA are needed.
- There is a need for wider promotion of, and advocacy for, RRA. The legitimacy of RRA/PRA approaches still requires reinforcement among policy and decision makers. Until RRA is seen as a valid and cost-effective planning approach, many officials will remain hesitant to promote it. It is thus critical to involve officials as much as possible in pre-RRA orientations and mini in-field sabbaticals. Likewise, it is important for RRA teams to continue to

find ways to prove that RRA approaches can and do generate reliable and manageable qualitative and quantitative data for planning.

- Money and time for RRA training and in-field use must be formally allocated in annual budgets and work-plans.
- Timing of RRA initiatives is critical. In Indonesia, exploratory RRA activities could serve as good preparation for annual Village Development Consensus Meetings for which the Village Resilience Committee is expected to develop a list of project priorities and preliminary project proposals. While bottom-up planning activities are frustrated by a number of factors, the criticism that locally-generated projects are nothing more than unsubstantiated 'wish-lists' is one common reason cited for top-down selection of projects. Pre-meeting RRAs undertaken on a village, agro-ecosystem or regional basis could help villagers identify and describe local problems and potentials, complete with supporting data. This strategy would help increase levels of popular participation (by women, by the poor and less-powerful, by the landless) in project identification and prioritisation. The well-documented information yielded in this way could counter the wish-list argument and help lower-level planners justify and promote projects suggested by villagers.
- Formalisation of RRA activities might reduce the quality and flexibility of the methodology. RRA/PRA approaches are perhaps not for everyone. Their institutionalisation may force those who are, for whatever reason, less disposed toward PRA/RRA, to carry them out nevertheless. This is bound to suffocate the flexibility and innovation that marks a good appraisal.

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