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## Handle with care! Rapid studies and the poor

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### • Introduction

It is now ten years since Robert Chambers argued forcefully for 'putting the last first'. The poorest still have difficulties coming on stage. According to Chambers the "*techniques of RRA, carefully developed and used, can raise awareness and understanding of rural poverty, and improve actions*" but, also that "*one danger with RRA is that it will always be rushed. A corollary of Parkinson's law is that whatever is planned exceeds the time available for doing it. If this occurs, it will once again be the remoter areas and the poorer people who are left out*" (1983). Almost a full decade later Chambers is still worried. 'Rapid' has become a liability, he writes, and suggests that it should be substituted by 'relaxed' (1992) which would be a more appropriate way of working in applied research, and for learning from the poor and empowering them.

As an example, we describe here how rapid research techniques were used by a study team for a bilateral development agency in a study of contemporary change in Tanzania (Booth *et al.*, 1993), and compare this with our own experiences of using RRA techniques in village-level studies in Tanzania (Christiansson *et al.*, 1992).

The agency study draws both on previous studies and field research using 'rapid' techniques in 12 villages from different parts of the country. The authors argue that too often academic research fails to integrate macro and micro levels and also suffers from too long a maturity time to be of real use in development work. They hope to address these shortcomings. They take on two issues that are currently intensively debated in Tanzania, namely the role and consequences of structural

adjustment programmes and the introduction of a multi-party system. The authors note that for both these issues polarised camps have tended to form, due partly to different ideological attitudes, but also because the processes are often observed at too high a level of abstraction. By introducing data from community and household levels they hope to demonstrate how people are actually affected by and contend with the processes of change that are occurring.

Implications of the desk study of macro level changes carried out by the study team are discussed as they relate to village level conditions. In our view, the report demonstrates a methodological weakness which makes us question the conclusions the authors draw on how economic liberalisation in Tanzania has influenced "*the poorest groups, women and young people*" (p. iii, also p.117) whose plight was of particular interest in this study. We will argue that the study does not contain information on these groups.

### Missing the poor

Ten years ago Barbara Grandin (1983) showed how easy it is to miss the poor in studies focused on local social stratification. She was able to demonstrate how a study of wealth differences in group ranches in Kenya failed to include the poor. The researchers had relied on suggestions from the ranch chairmen to construct the sample. She discovered this by checking the survey results against the results of a complete census which had previously been carried out. Although the researchers were pleased that they had found significant differences between their wealth cohorts and assumed that the sampling technique had thus tapped wealth differences on the ranch, their lowest category in fact corresponded to the

middle class. This distorted the results of the survey completely. For instance, the researchers had put the mean of cattle owned by poor households at 51, when in fact it was 15. For the whole ranch they had calculated a household mean of 215 cattle, whereas the true mean was 109. Box 1 gives other examples of how the poor can be missed.

During the agency field study, poor people were identified in relative terms (those who make it, as compared to those who do not). The adjective 'poor' was avoided, as it would have had "*connotations of destitution or indigence*" (p. 58). The aim was to avoid giving offence by not talking about destitute people, but in effect this meant that the genuinely poor were excluded from the discussion.

In the villages where we have worked ourselves, the concepts 'those who manage' and 'those who do not manage', are indeed common. To study social stratification we used the well-established RRA method wealth ranking which is designed to identify local concepts of stratification. 'Those who do not manage' are generally taken to mean people who are not able to cultivate all the land they

formally had access to, following the land reforms of the 1970s. They often arrange for someone better off to plough their land for them. In compensation the owners of the oxen or the tractor will be given half or more of the land to cultivate themselves. This group of poor farmers will normally survive by doing occasional farm work for others. Although not self-reliant, they are not necessarily destitute.

Below this group of people are, however, those who are described as "people of inferior conditions" (*watu wa hali duni*), "without anything" (*hana kitu*) or "totally destitute" (*maskini kabisa*). They are commonly known as day-labourers (*vibarua*). Many of them are not farmers at all. Some of them are landless, while others have formal access to land but lack the capacity to cultivate it for various reasons. In the areas we have studied these groups of destitute people form a significant proportion of the village population, ranging from seven per cent to more than half of the households. The lower figure was recorded in a village with high outmigration of poor people.

#### BOX 1 IDENTIFYING THE POOR

Even when using wealth ranking, precautions must be taken to make sure that the poorest of the poor are included. In *RRA Notes* 15 Pretty et al. provide an illuminating example. During a RRA study in India, villagers systematically excluded those who had huts, not houses, and depended on casual labour (1992). Welbourn, summarising experiences from RRA fieldwork in Sierra Leone, Ghana, Malawi and Bangladesh, observes that the poorest are excluded from meetings, and that their views are not represented (1991). In Ethiopia, Jonfa et al. note that even during modelling, a more participatory technique than a meeting, the finished product did not reflect all groups resident in the village (1991). From India, Chandramouli described particular arrangements made to ensure that the views of the poorest can be included at meetings (1991). The problem is not restricted to developing countries. A RRA study in Switzerland met with similar problems (Scheurmeier and Ison 1992). A large number of examples can be cited confirming that without extra efforts made to include the poorest, their situation will not be adequately understood.

If wealth ranking, social mapping or constructing reliable village rosters are considered too time-consuming, other much quicker methods can be used to identify sub-groups within a village. A Zairean trial is described by Schaefer (1992).

It appears from the agency report that they never encountered the destitute households in any of the 12 villages visited. Rather, some evidence in the report points in the opposite direction. One passage in particular upsets us. The authors write that “*ease of importation combined with competitive selling means that there is no longer any reason to wear rags*” (p. 61, our emphasis). If this is to be taken as the study team's view (the wording is somewhat ambiguous), it confirms that they did not come to know of the problems faced by the poorest groups. However, if, as is more likely, it is a conclusion from the focus-group discussions, then it indicates that the poorest groups were not represented on these occasions. By not ensuring the inclusion of the particular target group in the study and not giving them safe opportunities to express themselves, the study team became unduly dependent on what was publicly said about local social stratification. This raises doubts about their conclusion that poorer people welcome economic liberalisation. What they at most are able to state is that they got such opinions from people who in our studies are decisive steps up the social ladder.

We should consider the possibility that destitute people were in fact not present in any of the 12 villages visited by the study team. Could it be that the villages we studied in Babati, Hanang and Kondoa districts were special cases? We do not think so for several reasons. In themselves these villages are quite varied - ethnically, in degree of market involvement, in terms of religion and historically. We had not chosen them because they were known to exemplify particularly dramatic social stratification. Nor did well-informed people in the district administrations know of them as villages with a particularly large number of very poor households. An earlier nationwide survey confirms our findings. Intra-village income inequality was found to be high. Of the total inequality registered, 84 per cent was recorded as due to differences within villages while the remaining 16 per cent resulted from differences between villages (Collier et al. 1986). The agency report also confirms that socio-economic inequalities are significant in Tanzanian villages (p. 71). It notes that the study team not construct a poverty index (p. 58), indicating that they are not in fact so sure that their

account gives a comprehensive picture of rural socio-economic stratification.

There are well-known reasons for excluding the poorest. The poorest groups are routinely (consciously or not) left outside discussions of village affairs<sup>1</sup>. They are discarded when it comes to planning for improvements because they are considered not to have anything to contribute. They are never introduced to outsiders. They are, in Robert Chambers' words, “*the unseen and the unknown*” (1983). As the samples in our study were drawn from the entire village populations we were able to include them. Wealth rankings likewise disclosed their existence.

A tight time schedule (12 villages in six weeks, with about two-and-a-half days per village) sets its limits. The agency authors wrote that: “*While in principle we might have adopted one of a number of approaches which would have minimised undesirable influences on the composition of the groups, none was feasible in the time available*” (p. 49-50). Not finding a feasible approach one ends up dependant on those who are, in Chambers' words, “*less poor and more influential*” (1983), those fluent and easily available while methods to adjust for such biases are available. What benefits accrue to making a study so rapid that there is not even time to use the appropriate RRA methods? The shorter the time in the field, the more urgent it becomes to make sure that one keeps close to the focus of the study, which in this case was the situation of the poor.

### Interpreting the results

The authors draw a number of provisional conclusions. This presents the reader with some dilemmas about the value of their statements. How do you go from provisional conclusions to proper conclusions? By including 12 more villages in the study? By using double the time spent in each village? By increasing the number of researchers involved? By spending more time on reading

<sup>1</sup> In one of the villages we studied, the village government denied that the population had increased since the land reforms in the mid 1970s. They did not wish to officially accept knowledge of the considerable number of landless households in the village.

up? Or by doing something entirely different from what the study team did? And how are we supposed to use such provisional conclusions? As the truth, although not quite proven? Or as half-truths?

These questions are important for all of us who use RRA methods and are involved in applied research to consider, but they are not easy to answer. Having concluded provisionally, as is the case in the report under review, that *“import and domestic trade liberalisation has been good for rural people, including those locally regarded as relatively poor, and perhaps especially poor women”* (p.118), this easily becomes, when quoted in second- or third-hand, an established truth which guides future policies. Equally easily the “provisional” is played down by those whose interests are served by this finding. Who takes the responsibility that provisional conclusions are treated as provisional? No one, of course. The authors cannot guide how their conclusions are used, neither can the agency who commissioned the study.

Our suggestion is to draw conclusions when the data allow that, and to treat the observations that cannot be backed up properly as hypotheses for further studies. To identify important and well-defined questions is no negligible result of a rapid study.

Let us now move on to some of the provisional conclusions. The authors write that *“it is a mistake to think that the liberalisation of foreign and domestic trade since 1984 has benefited only better-off consumers”* (p. 94). Having already argued that those who are genuinely poor were not included in the study we now ask on what basis this conclusion is reached and to what groups of people this refers.

During the group discussions those present said they appreciated that more goods are available in the shops. This remains the one unambiguous fact presented by the authors in support of their thesis. Other possibly positive factors reported are:

- That rural economies are (increasingly?) diversified (p. 94f.), but this may be just an extension of the survival strategies people resorted to during the 1970s and

“in the years of national economic difficulty” in the first half of the 1980s (p. 119).

- That this diversification perhaps provides opportunities for women and young people to renegotiate resource flows and power relations. But they write that the diversified economy may not be as helpful to “the poorest rural people” as an agriculturally-based recovery would be (p. iv, 119).

On the negative side other facts are reported:

- During the last decade there has been a substantial decline in education and medical services, even reducing post-Independence achievements to “just buildings” (p. 80f.).
- Because of the break-down of cattle-dip services and lack of veterinary drugs, livestock losses are substantial (p. 87).
- *“Increased production costs are making life more difficult for staple food producers”* (p. 118).
- Infrastructure improvements made since Independence are now in jeopardy (p. 95).
- Environmental degradation is a serious threat to the resource base of the rural population (p. v, 120). This affects, as is well known, particularly poor people.

Given these facts, we doubt that it is reasonable to argue, as the study team does, that they have proved, albeit provisionally, that *“trade liberalisation has been good for rural people”*.

### Opinions or facts?

The focus-group discussions register villagers' opinions, and this is indeed valuable. But when the authors tried to explain the reasons behind these attitudes they reveal a limitation of this kind of rapid study. RRA methods are useful for registering opinions. When it comes to establishing material conditions it is only possible to measure the opinions of those who happened to be present when the question was

raised. It is not one and the same thing that people say that things have improved, and that they *have* improved. Registering attitudes towards change is not the same as measuring changed conditions. Surely the first issue is of interest to know, we do not question that. But it is not the same as the second.

Accepting for the sake of argument that it was unambiguously stated in the focus-group discussions that things have improved because of trade liberalisation; is it thereby established that trade liberalisation has been good for rural people, as the study team writes?

### • Conclusions

We have argued that the genuinely poor who constitute, at least in the villages we have studied, a substantial part of the rural population were not considered by the agency study team. Since they were not included in the analysis we questioned the basis for the study team's claim that import and domestic trade liberalisation has been good for the rural poor.

From the report we have summarised various effects of economic liberalisation mentioned by the authors. Putting them on a simple balance sheet we were not convinced that the beneficial effects outweighed the drawbacks. In our opinion, the decline in education and medical services, the increased cost of living, and the long term problems of environmental degradation are most severe setbacks for poor rural households. The study team makes a different assessment. Who is right? The report provides no basis for determining that.

That "*the unseen and the unknown*" (Chambers, 1983) were not included in the study does, however, not imply that their living conditions cannot come to the fore in research using rapid methods. But it does demonstrate that specific efforts need to be made to ensure that it happens.

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