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Consensus or cover-up? the limitations of group meetings

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· Introduction

Wera-Angole in Soroti District, eastern Uganda is an area marked by two dramatic recent events: the end of the insurgency in 1991 and the virtual collapse of the area's agricultural base. Reasons for the collapse include the loss of all cattle following extensive cattle raids by the neighbouring Karimojong, the demise of the cotton market following mismanagement in the marketing cooperatives, and the outbreak of cassava mosaic.

In 1993 the Food Systems Under Stress (FSUS) project¹ held a participatory research workshop in Wera-Angole to help understand how food insecure groups and individuals perceive obstacles to food security. The workshop brought together social scientists, national planners, community workers, extensionists, some district-level officials and villagers who live and farm in that fragile environment.

The term 'workshop' in this paper refers to a series of focus group meetings and plenary sessions for conducting preliminary research. Meetings were spread out over three days, with the inclusion of transect walks at the end of the workshop. Participants were selected by the sub-county chief following a meeting with FSUS representatives. Equal numbers of women and men were chosen. Findings from this workshop have since served as the basis for formulating a long-term research proposal.

Stress factors in the food system were identified through the use of participatory appraisal methods (including resource

mapping, seasonal calendars, daily activity profiles, small group discussions, problem ranking, income or expenditure pie charts, Venn diagramming, transect walks and market visits) and then ranked according to their perceived magnitude. The stress factors fell into three areas:

1. the inability to benefit from markets and to boost cash flows;
2. the changing nature of the resource base (loss of cattle, reduced production of food crops and cotton, loss of valuable trees); and,
3. institutional constraints (such as the lack of adequate support services).

The findings made during the workshop were marked by a general consensus that cut across the divisions of gender and age.

However we are concerned that information obtained in the public arena of a workshop, a common forum for PRA work, can hide disparate, multiple and muted voices. We ask what aspects of social reality were revealed to the researchers and what themes were left insufficiently explored. The latter, we argue, are themes that require further probing and greater familiarity with the local community, ie. more time for in-depth interviews and observation. Moreover, we consider whether the topics for further research should be answered *before* researchers become involved in the design of action plans.

· Findings and unresolved issues

In this section we examine the three main stress factors in the food system in more detail. We describe how the community members

present described their main problems and agreed on their causes and solutions. We then give examples of how this apparent consensus may have masked the views of others.

Gender relations and markets

The recent collapse of the rural economic base was triggered by the loss of cattle through raids. Having lost *all* their cattle, the people in Wera-Angole can no longer cultivate staple crops as extensively as they used to do, since they lack the labour to do by hand what they used animal traction for previously. The labour shortage is also caused by the number of men who died in the insurgency. Many women now have to do the jobs men used to do, such as ploughing. Improved food security in neighbouring villages has also reduced the range of available markets. Yet the villagers are anxious to rebuild their herds because the potential for agriculture remains very good. Rice, sorghum, millet, groundnuts and sugar could all be produced in abundance.

To cope with the loss of the cotton and cattle markets, many villagers now grow food crops that are also cash crops. These include groundnuts, sorghum, millet, beans and maize, but all are grown on much reduced areas. However, and on this point there was general agreement, the cash-starved villagers sell more than is good for their well-being, and do so at the worst possible prices.

Although everyone at the workshop spoke highly of the food-cash crops 'solution', and agreed that millet is the food/cash crop *par excellence*, it transpired during a transect walk that not everyone has the fertile land that millet requires. This observation led us to suggest that further research is needed into whether millet sales might not be a coping strategy preferred (ie. affordable) only by better-off villagers.

Discussion of millet and markets also resulted in another consensus, namely that since the cattle raids women now shoulder most of the financial responsibilities such as school and medical fees. The search for alternative market outlets is led by women. This has caused a major social revolution in terms of household relations.

To obtain cash, women brew and sell *ajon* (millet beer) or crude *waragi* (made of potatoes). A man said: "*Women now lead as income providers. Men cannot brew because these activities relate to the kitchen. It is the men who now come to the women and ask for money.*"

Men explained that they tend to need more money for buying beer: "*What has made women leaders in income is also that men now spend too much money on ajon. Before the raids we had money and we also worked more land together. And there used to be plenty of beer during ceremonies. So we spent little money on beer, we did not have to.*" Where does this money for beer now come from? From small group discussions we learned that the answer is not that the men ask women for money, as suggested above, but rather that men sell millet.

To explore this further, we asked in a plenary session what the men's need for beer money meant for the relationship between men and women. Was men's need for cash something that might contribute to food insecurity within the home? The plenary discussion strengthened the cohesive image of Wera-Angole. Women publicly stated that they were able to exert control over household food supplies and that men's ability to sell food from the granary was limited. Men are only allowed to sell food crops at times of plenty, ie. harvest times, when food prices are depressed. While millet is the crop which men are usually trying to sell, the decision to sell remains at the discretion of women. The men's silence on this issue indicated agreement. (Only on the last day, during the transect walk, did some men privately suggest that women could not sell any food without their husbands' consent. But such consent was easily given, they added).

Despite this public consensus, we felt there was clearly scope for tension between the food-conscious women who want to buy millet *from* the market (thus avoiding using home-grown crops) and their men/husbands who may want to sell home-grown millet *to* the market. Does spending money on *ajon* sour household relations as it syphons off hard-earned cash (mostly earned by women) that could be spent on feeding household

members? We concluded that this is too important not to be investigated further.

An explanation for this public consensus may be that women could not really admit or discuss the issue without exposing men's financial weaknesses. Interestingly, in the *public* space of this participatory workshop, women pointed out that husbands must not be blamed for their reduced contribution to the food supply. Such exposure is inappropriate in public or in the presence of strangers (including PRA facilitators). Trust must first be built up, which takes time. Whether we worked in small groups or in a plenary session, the workshop was always a public space.

A diverse resource base

The closest that women came to discussing inter-household social differentiation in Wera-Angole was to comment: *"The problem here is not land availability but the distribution of fertility. Some households have fertile lands while others only have poor soils."* While details were not provided, and no individuals were named, women nevertheless elaborated that swampland is valued because gardens there retain moisture throughout the year, and millet and rice do well. Rice can be double cropped and millet sown in December is said to be excellent.

The influence of the skewed distribution of fertile land on household food security is not clear at present. However it was striking that workshop participants frequently referred to a 1956 by-law under which no one was allowed to cultivate within a radius of 400 steps from the edge of the swamp, to reserve this strip of land for cattle grazing. In theory, the law is still in force, people said, but now that the cattle have gone, *"some villagers"* are encroaching on the communal land and a system of individual tenure is emerging. What exactly is implied in this move towards a more individual approach to land tenure? Are any disputes going on? Not surprisingly perhaps, this question of inter-household differences was not the kind of issue participants wanted discussed at their *first* workshop. A further example of the need to probe into the difficult area of unequal access to resources is given in Box 1.

BOX 1

DIFFERENTIATED ACCESS TO WILD RESOURCES: THE SHEA TREE

The shea tree is allegedly on the verge of extinction. Shea (*Vitellaria paradoxa*), *ekunguru* in Ateso, grows on upland soils and its nuts provide excellent butter for cooking. Youths like to pick the nuts to make money for school fees. The tree's survival is threatened because the tree is good for charcoal making and because soldiers stationed in the area use its bark to smoke out mosquitoes in their camp at night. However, there is now restricted access to shea nuts. As with the rice land near the swamps (once communally used for grazing, but now increasingly considered private property), access to shea nuts is no longer on a free-for-all basis. *"Those who grow millet or sorghum near such trees now have first rights to their fruits and seeds"* one participant said.

After what we learned about the restricted access to shea nuts and about the increased encroachment on land on which food cropping used to be prohibited, it became clear that individual interests are manifest and that the conspicuous "cohesive front" during most of the workshop was masking important internal divisions. Regarding access to shea tree products, future researchers must ask: *"who decides who can grow millet near such lucrative trees?"* A whole story about unequal access to resources (land, labour, produce) is likely to unfold.

Institutional constraints

Most people agreed, although some individuals abstained, that certain government departments deserved heavy criticism. Circle (Venn) diagramming provided the context for discussing this. On one occasion, the Forestry Department came under fire:

"Although the staff are around, we receive no help with planting trees. Moreover, a lot of charcoal burning is taking place, for which the shea tree is used. The charcoal burners are destroying a tree that is very valuable to us as it provides us with income. The Forestry Department is doing nothing to stop the destruction..."

Fisheries, Health, Education and Water also came in for serious criticism. Fisheries staff allegedly show no interest in improving fishing technology, even though swamp fishing provides much needed income. The Health service was criticised because of its "cost sharing" policy (300 Ugandan shillings per consultation). The Education department was blamed for not paying its teachers on time. The Water department, although praised for having repaired certain boreholes in the area, was again criticised for not having added any.

While the discussions based on circle diagramming were frank and revealing, the exercise has its limitations. Answers should not be accepted at face value. Researchers need to probe deeper and learn about the complexity of the issues, addressing specific interactions between individual staff and individual farmers. It is quite feasible that power relations between, for example, extension workers and certain local farmers may colour people's responses when discussing more general institutional relationships. The attempts (either existing or anticipated) by extension workers to pull villagers into projects, or *vice versa*, can create a hidden agenda against which seemingly spontaneous discussions must be understood (Long and Long, 1992).

• Provisional conclusions

Before decentralised policy initiatives develop from reliable understandings of how poor people perceive their own food insecurity, their authors will need to be clear about social differentiation and how people interact and cope (Dzingirai, 1992; Pottier, 1995). The workshop described here led to a high level of participation and exchange of views, often with a clear sense that a forum for genuine dialogue had been set up. However, politics (between and within households) and real coping mechanisms were not and could not be discussed.

The major obstacle is that workshops, no matter how participatory they may be, are still public activities during which certain aspects of everyday social life must remain hidden from the outside world. Some coping strategies can be, and were, discussed openly, such as

selling food below its marketable value; food for work; collecting wild foods and so on. Others are not to be mentioned in public (theft; food for sex/marriage; poor people cheating each other when trading). Public discussion does not move beyond the ground rules, the safe discourse, the official model. It is therefore no more than a first step in learning about actual practices (Nuijens, 1992).

The absent voices in the Soroti workshop were especially the 'private' voices, the things people say at home when the research team (from whom so much is expected!) is out of earshot. At the same time, but insufficiently highlighted in this article because of restricted space, we are also aware of the absence of the voices of very poor villagers. Very poor people did not take part in the workshop. We met some of them during the transect walk (eg. teenage parents), but they remained distant. With hindsight, it seems the very poor had not been invited by the sub-chief through whom invitations had been sent, quite simply because their presence was not deemed necessary.

Researchers must also realise that participatory research workshops present participants with a unique opportunity, that is, with a potential instrument for changing existing practices. This was clear in the Soroti workshop, where many participants were disappointed that the occasion could not be turned into a kind of instantaneous legislative body that would scrutinise, revive and implement the by-laws that were being ignored by some members of the community. In this respect, ironically, the workshop was not so much "*far removed from everyday practice*" (Nuijens, 1992) as uncomfortably part of it.

This points to the most urgent issue: *at what point can researchers or facilitators feel sufficiently knowledgeable to justify advocating change?* To make continued involvement in transformative research ethically justifiable, the research questions raised in this article will need to be answered with urgency. It is our belief that only through more intensive, longer-term field research (Dzingirai, 1992) can we fully understand how poor people organise themselves in situations of food stress. In future research on Food Systems Under Stress (FSUS), researchers will need to answer the questions we have raised

before they align themselves with certain sections in 'the community' in support of the latter's quest for empowerment.

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NOTES

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