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The respective merits of RRA and conventional methods for longer-term research

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• Introduction

In 1992/93 I spent a year in Benin, West Africa, conducting fieldwork for my PhD thesis *Forests, Fields and Markets: A Study of Indigenous Tree Products in the Woody Savannas of the Bassila Region, Benin*¹. This article discusses experiences gained during this fieldwork. A variety of methods were used to investigate the availability and use of indigenous non-timber tree products. These included conventional research methods such as ecological transects to measure tree density, fortnightly phenological observations of marked trees to examine seasonal availability of products, measurement of yields and regular market surveys. In addition various RRA methods were employed ranging from matrices to calendars, maps and transects. This particular combination of methods gave rise to a number of reflections on their respective advantages and disadvantages, summarised in Table 1.

• The lone researcher

As a PhD student I found myself planning and carrying out most of my research on my own with only the help of an interpreter or a field assistant. However, for a small part of the research (a study on women's incomes and expenditure) I was fortunate enough to work in a team with Eva Sodeik (an anthropologist)

and Mouftaou Fagbemy (a rural sociologist)². Working with them greatly helped the use of RRA methods. Using such methods alone proved much less productive, as it is nearly impossible to facilitate the methods, keep note of the process and discussion, and still ask probing questions. This is particularly true when the research is carried out with large groups of farmers. It was only when working with individual informants that I felt able to use the RRA methods successfully on my own. However, even then I would have preferred to have one or two more researchers (from different disciplines) to help in the interpretation of the results.

In contrast, the conventional research methods employed were relatively easy to carry out alone or with a local field assistant. These methods all rely on repeating the same, rigorously defined, observations over space (ie. the ecological transects and yield measurements) or over time (ie. the phenological study and the market survey). This repetition made it possible to train an assistant to help with the work or indeed, for them to carry it out on their own.

¹ The research was sponsored by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation with some additional funding from the University of London Central Research Fund and the School of Oriental and African Studies.

² They were both involved in the joint German/Beninois pilot project *The Restoration of Forest Resources in the Bassila Region*.

SOME DIFFERENTIATING FACTORS	<i>RRA methods (maps, transect walks, matrices, calendars)</i>	<i>Conventional methods (transects, phenology observations, yield measurements, market survey)</i>
<i>Carried out by whom?</i>	<i>Research team</i>	<i>Lone researcher</i>
<i>Is experience of methods required?</i>	<i>Preferably</i>	<i>Not necessarily (often fairly standardised)</i>
<i>Is experience of area necessary?</i>	<i>Definitely</i>	<i>Very little</i>
<i>Whose time is taken up?</i>	<i>Local people's</i>	<i>Researcher's</i>
<i>Are expectations raised? Are underlying conflicts exposed?</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not to same extent</i>

• **Experience of the methods**

All the methods used during the fieldwork were completely new to me. Despite my inexperience, I found the application of the conventional research methods to be fairly straightforward. They are well documented, often quite standardised and, once adapted to the local conditions, can be applied in a very routine manner. The main hurdle to overcome was having enough confidence in my own ability to do the work. RRA methods, however, not only require a researcher to have confidence in herself, but more importantly, to have confidence in the ability of local people to analyse and discuss. For a conventionally trained scientist used to being in control of research situations, this was the most difficult aspect of those methods.

Conventional methods needed some fine-tuning in the first few weeks, but further experience in their use made little apparent difference to the quality of the data collected. However, the opposite was true for the RRA methods, the use of which improved enormously with increasing experience. By the end of the fieldwork period it was possible to apply a far greater variety of RRA methods in a much more effective manner than when I started. With subsequent exposure to RRA methods, I now feel that it would have been possible to use them much more widely, even to the point of replacing some of the conventional methods. In particular the introduction of various historical RRA methods, such as maps of collection sites and

matrices of preferred species then and now, would have provided important information to complement the rather static nature of the data collected through conventional methods.

• **Experience of the area**

I had never visited the study area before fieldwork began. Contrary to my expectations, this did not complicate the application of most of the conventional research methods. A few weeks of exploring the local vegetation and getting to know the markets were enough to adapt both the ecological and market survey methods to the local conditions. In contrast, although the RRA methods require little adaptation to a specific location, their success depends on the facilitator having an intimate knowledge of the area in which they are being used. Without an understanding of both the physical and human environment it is not possible to interpret fully the resulting discussion or to ask the necessary probing questions.

This became very clear in the joint research I undertook on women's incomes and expenditure. Our team of three people carried out the same research with five groups of women from different ethnic groups, more or less one after the other, over a period of nine months. At the start of the study two members of the team had only been in the area for one and two months respectively. The information collected later is much more complete and reliable than the information obtained from the first group of women. In the early stages we

accepted too much information at face value, only to find later that it was contradicted by information from other sources. At a later stage, with a deeper understanding of the area, we were better able to recognise evasive statements or conflicting information, and could try to resolve these issues through more probing questions or the use of other complementary RRA methods.

• **Research time**

All the conventional research methods were very labour-intensive for the researchers, but rarely used up much of local people's time. Even interviews could be kept quite short or carried out while the respondents engaged in other work. In comparison, the RRA methods produced more results for a given unit of my time, but required a much heavier time investment from the participating villagers. While it was always left to local people to choose their most convenient time, the RRA-based discussions nevertheless took them away from their other tasks for up to two or even three hours.

• **Raising expectations and exposing conflicts**

The presence of an outside researcher is always likely to raise questions and expectations in the minds of local people. However, in both the ecological and market survey methods direct contact with local people was minimal and usually restricted to one or two individuals at a time. After initial curiosity people grew accustomed to seeing me carry out the same routine tasks week after week and appeared to accept my explanations that this research would have no direct benefits for them.

The use of RRA methods turned out quite different in this respect. Asking people to come together in a group to discuss certain issues causes excitement and inevitably raises their hopes that they may benefit in some way from the exercise. It was very hard to convince them that this was 'just' research, particularly for the work which was carried out with the two colleagues from the forestry project. This was in spite of the fact that we used the

methods very explicitly to extract data, and not to encourage local analysis and action.

Expectations were not the only things to be raised during the RRA work. A number of underlying conflicts were exposed in a way that probably would not have occurred with the conventional methods. During the ecological and market surveys any conversations held were usually with individuals rather than groups. The people concerned sometimes did discuss issues of conflict with me. They had enough trust that my interpreters and I would not break their confidence and there were no witnesses to challenge or hold them to their statements at a later date. However, once disagreements surfaced in the group RRA context it was impossible to sweep them under the carpet (Box 1).

BOX 1 A BOUNDARY DISPUTE

A particular instance of group conflict occurred during the drawing of a village map, originally intended to show the location of the main natural resources used by the villagers. The villagers concerned belonged to the indigenous ethnic group and decided that only the traditional landowners, of whom there are about a dozen, could reliably draw the map. A second meeting was convened with all the landowners (or their representatives) and each started to draw his or her share of the village territory. Though not requested by either myself or my two co-facilitators, they also drew the internal boundaries between different landowners' territories on the map. This was the first time any of these boundaries had ever been drawn or even discussed in public, and inevitably there are disputed areas. At one point it was only the village chief's timely intervention which prevented two elderly and respected men from coming to blows, an incident which left everybody feeling very uncomfortable and ashamed. In particular my colleagues and I felt unhappy about our role in initiating this totally unexpected dispute, which we were completely unprepared to deal with.

• **Conclusions**

In conclusion, conventional methods can offer a single researcher a straightforward approach to longer-term research. These can be adapted to local conditions fairly rapidly and do not

require a detailed prior understanding of the research area in order to produce good quality data. However, RRA methods can produce interesting insights much more rapidly, thus saving the researcher valuable time. Although they are certainly more effective when carried out by a multi-disciplinary team, RRA methods can be applied successfully by a single researcher. This is particularly true if they are used with individual informants or very small groups, and if the researcher already has a good understanding of the study area and can cross-check information with that obtained from other research methods.

In my study I found the combination of the two types of methods to be very rewarding, with the RRA work supplying the contextual information for the quantitative data provided by the conventional research methods.

However, researchers need to consider carefully the context in which their research is being carried out. If their research is conceived as a prelude to some kind of action (whether project intervention or community mobilisation and organisation), more interactive participatory methods are very appropriate. However, if no action is planned, it might be better to rely largely on conventional research methods and use RRA methods only to complement these, being careful to avoid raising false hopes or exposing conflicts unnecessarily.

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