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Revealing gender differences through well-being ranking in Uganda

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• Introduction

In a wealth-ranking exercise conducted in 1990 in nine villages in the Masaka District of south-west Uganda, we asked respondents to rank households in their village according to their *obugagga*, the Luganda term for 'riches' or material wealth (Nabaitu *et al.*, 1993).

Whilst analysing the results a difference was observed between the way the seven male respondents interpreted *obugagga* and the interpretation of the one woman respondent. The woman ranked according to material wealth, but she also took into account the present social circumstances of the households. The men concentrated on the 'richness' of the householders. From the explanations given for their ranking criteria, not only were we able to gain some insight into villagers' perceptions of who was best and worst-off in their villages and the reasons why this was so, but the findings also alerted us to the differences which may exist between different people's ranking criteria, perhaps because of varying social situations, experience and gender.

In a follow-up in 1993 we tried to tap these perceptions further in another ranking exercise. We also hoped to verify the usefulness of indicators derived from a longitudinal study of household coping strategies (Seeley, 1993). For this ranking exercise we asked respondents about the 'well-being' of householders in their villages. The Luganda phrase used was *embeera n'obulama bwabantu*, literally translated as 'the conditions of day-to-day life of people'. However, this change of term did not make much difference to the way respondents perceived the exercise; some

respondents insisted that all we wanted to know about was material wealth. One man raised the fear that we were conducting a tax assessment exercise although we had hoped that talking of 'well-being' not 'wealth' would allay such fears.

• Rationale

A considerable amount of data on the socio-economic status of households in the study area was obtained through a questionnaire-based household survey in 1989/90. Researchers found the interpretation of these data difficult for a variety of reasons. Some people feared that we would disclose details of landholding and crop production to tax officials and so withheld this information. Others had only a general idea of harvests and buying and selling of farm products over the year or were reluctant to disclose the details. Information given on education or employment status did not help in providing a guide to economic status because in present day Uganda most salaries are so low that purchasing power is very limited. Thus, the 1990 wealth ranking exercise was conducted in order to shed some light on the survey data.

The well-being exercise in 1993 was carried out to:

1. Explore gender differences in the perception of socio-economic status.
2. Enable researchers to arrive at a stratified sample for a study of female-carers and coping with sickness.
3. Provide data to verify the socio-economic indicators drawn from the study of household coping strategies.

Method

For the well-being exercise nine villages were selected, five ranked in the previous wealth-ranking exercise (which included one of the household coping study villages), and four others chosen to represent parts of the study area not represented by the other villages selected. Three men and three women undertook the ranking in each village. They were selected by the leaders in their village to represent, according to these leaders' perceptions, different socio-economic groups. Two local interviewers trained in the use of the technique, a man and a woman, visited the

home of each participant for the purpose of the ranking exercise.

Results

Households best able to cope

Table 1 shows the criteria used to identify those people who were best able to cope. They had well-maintained houses, ate good food, had bedding and clothes. They owned cars, bicycles and radios and they employed labourers. They could afford to go to fee-paying clinics and pay school fees.

Table 1. Criteria for households best able to cope

INDICATORS	RESPONSES		
	Women	Men	Total
Own & cultivate a lot of land	25	26	51
Sell <i>matooke/mbidde</i> **	26	20	46
Sell coffee	18	15	33
Own cows from which they get milk (to consume & sell)	18	12	30
Have many friends & relatives	22	5	27
Have many sources of income (traders/ taxi drivers/ builders)	8	9	17
Own goats/ pigs/ hens (could be sold in an emergency)	5	2	7
Own rental properties	5	0	5
Sell brew	4	1	5
Are well-educated	3	0	3
Are with few dependents	1	0	1

** *Matooke* is a type of plantain (cooking banana) which is the main staple in the area. *Mbidde* are bananas used in beer brewing.

Respondents explained their choice of criteria:

One 36-year old man said that householders in this category *"communicate well among themselves so that problems are easily solved"*.

A 24-year old man said *"They are able to help themselves because they have income from buildings. They have land from which they get food for consumption and sale. Some have vehicles so that when they travel they do not waste money on transport. They have banana and coffee plantations. The roofs of their houses have iron sheets."*

A 55-year old woman gave the following detailed description of these households: *"They have income and relatives who can help. They have more than one piece of land on which they have banana plantations and shambas of coffee."*

They have bicycles. Their houses are modern looking although some are roofed with grass. Children are in school. Some of them are well-educated. They have cows which give milk and goats and hens. When they don't have their own milk they can manage to buy it. They can employ casual labourers. They have knowledge, can plan for the future and can solve their own problems. If they are short of money at a time of crisis they can sell a pig or goat."

Households less able to cope

Those who were less able to cope (Table 2) were said to eat poorly (cassava and potatoes with meat only on festive occasions) and use only herbs for treatment. Their children were not in school and they could not pay their tax.

Table 2. Criteria for households least able to cope

INDICATORS	RESPONSES		
	Women	Men	Total
Without a permanent job (casual labourers)	21	21	42
Without land or having infertile land	17	9	26
With a very small, poor hut to stay in or are squatters	20	5	25
Without relatives or friends in the area	15	3	18
Who are sick/ old/ disabled	10	6	16
Who are youth just setting up their households	6	6	12
Who are drunkards	0	8	8
Who are widows (with many dependents)	5	2	7
With no possessions (that they could sell in a crisis)	1	3	4
Who live alone	1	2	3

Respondents described a range of different householders who were in this situation:

A 24-year old man described these householders as *"very old and unable to work. They have orphans to care for. Some have no land. Some are sick. They have no children to support them."*

A 43-year old woman said: *"He is old. He doesn't have his own kibanja. He sleeps anywhere. He is given food by people. He has no clothes to wear."*

One woman described the worst-off household as one where the head, a widower, was dying of AIDS-related illnesses, he had little land, his children were always sick.

A 71-year old man said *"These people have a place to stay but their houses are in the worst condition. Some will soon fall down and some are leaking. If they have land it is small and poor. Most labour for food in the village even if it is not a famine period. Some are drunkards. Some are youth living on the land of their parents."*

• Discussion

There was agreement among the 54 respondents that householders who were best able to cope with daily life and its crises were those who owned and cultivated large pieces of land on which they grew, in particular, *matooke*, *mbidde*, and coffee for sale. They tended to have more than one source of income and resources, such as livestock, which could be sold when cash was needed urgently. Twenty-two out of the 27 female respondents said that these householders had many friends and relatives who could help them. Only five of the men referred to the importance of such a support network.

Householders who did not have these resources were classed as the worst-off, and least able to cope in the villages. However, compounding factors such as sickness and old age which prevented people from earning a living and thus made things worse, were often referred to.

There was a tendency for the male respondents to divide their 'worst-off' groups into the

'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Those who deserved assistance, in their view, were the sick, weak, old, widowed and disabled (or in four cases the mentally handicapped or mad) as well as those who were landless. Those who were undeserving of assistance were said to be 'lazy', 'drunkards' or 'having too many children' (which in one man's view should have been avoided)¹.

The youth were given a low rank by many respondents because they were just starting out in life. One woman observed *"they are just building themselves, they get their food from their relatives"*. The men tended to take a less charitable view of the youth. One man complained that *"the youth are carefree and don't work for their living"*. An older man contrasted the youth unfavourably with the people in his 'best-off' category who were *"willing and able to participate in development projects"*. The two youngest respondents (both men aged 23 and 24) did not single out 'youth' in their ranking. They ranked the 'old and helpless' as the least able to cope.

Interestingly, two male respondents, from different villages, had a sub-group of their category one (the best-off) made up of people they called 'misers' and thus made the family suffer, those who had many resources but did not share them with their families (they did not pay school fees, treatment costs or buy good food).

All respondents were able to describe households who were vulnerable in times of crisis. Many of these had difficulty making ends meet from day to day. It was clear from the explanations given for the different

¹ These male informants complained that their own household was not included in the ranking exercise because they thought they should be in the 'deserving poor' category. They thought that if they were so ranked they might receive development assistance. Interestingly, one woman informant who wanted to rank her own household told us that it would be in category one (the most prosperous). Her self-ranking agreed with the rank given to her household by the other five informants. The informant's own household was omitted from the ranking that they did for their village, because it was thought that they would find it difficult to rank themselves.

categories that many respondents distinguished between people with the same resources who coped or did not cope because of the way in which the resources were used. One woman, for example, had ten different categories carefully defined according to the households' present circumstances and described who was coping better than in the past and those who, because of deaths and sickness, were poorer than before.

• Conclusion

There were some interesting differences between the indicators selected by the two genders: men tended to concentrate on material wealth, while the women noted the social circumstances of the households. This is in keeping with the findings of the initial wealth-ranking exercise.

While the variations in the indicators of socio-economic status did provide insight into the social make-up of the study community, the variation shows that the 'well-being ranking method' is not a precise tool for establishing socio-economic rank in a community. When different scores are combined, as is the usual practice in such ranking exercises, much of the variation in ranking given by individual respondents are 'ironed out'. If obtaining a socio-economic profile of an area is the sole aim of a study, perhaps with a view to providing information for further research or development inputs, this method should be used in combination with other, preferably qualitative, and perhaps longitudinal, data collection methods. This would help to ensure that the different ways in which women and men (old and young) see their communities are taken into account.

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