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Participatory livelihood monitoring in Southern Sudan

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• Introduction

A common problem among relief agencies working in regions of chronic conflict is the lack of reliable and up-to-date information on the socio-economic situation of communities and how this has been affected by war. The erosion of local civil service structures that normally collect and provide such baseline data means that agencies are frequently dependent on pre-war records or isolated studies. To supplement this they often need to conduct their own periodic surveys or devise more informal methods for gathering information.

Oxfam faced such a challenge in Southern Sudan after setting up an operational relief and rehabilitation programme in 1993 in response to conflict-triggered displacement in Eastern Bahr-el Ghazal. The programme was designed to rehabilitate basic services (primary health care, veterinary services, water and relief) to a population of predominantly semi-pastoralist Dinka people.

• The livelihood monitoring system

To help fill the information gap, Oxfam developed a method for monitoring the livelihoods of the local Dinka people early in 1995. Using local monitors to collect information on a range of indicators, the Oxfam team hoped to understand the livelihood patterns of the Dinka communities and how they adapted to changing circumstances. Monitors were trained to provide fortnightly reports on rainfall, crops, livestock and community welfare, using simple PRA techniques to gather information from a variety

of sources including contact farmers, key informants and direct observation.

This Livelihood Monitoring System, as it became known, set out to obtain general baseline data which would serve the whole programme as well as inform emergency responses. It has attempted to do this by encouraging local people to explore and analyse their own situation, as monitors or informants, using participatory methods as an alternative to the more extractive methods of rapid assessment by outsiders.

Livelihood is defined as the means of living people employ, that is, the activities they engage in to secure access to food, water, health, clothing, shelter and security.

Livelihood monitoring

The system provides an understanding of the livelihood systems of communities, in particular how they seek to meet basic needs and adapt to changing circumstances. It also explores which traditional responses to livelihood threats are intact and where they are under stress.

The system seeks to tap local knowledge by using local people and PRA techniques. It attempts to gain an insight into the complexity of livelihoods by incorporating classifications and distinctions employed by local people to describe qualitative differences between themselves.

Emergency early warning and assessment

The system also provides timely indication of any threats (actual or potential) to people's lives and livelihoods. Monitors report any emergency event or potential emergency - sudden or

cumulative - within or outside their monitoring areas. This includes: acute food or water shortages, disease epidemics (animal or human), displacement, looting (of cattle or property) or medical emergencies due to insecurity, and natural disasters (bush fires, flooding).

Using a simple checklist, monitors identify the nature and scale of emergencies as well as make a preliminary assessment of the capacities and needs of those affected. Checklists encourage simplicity, speed, and accuracy in assessment and focus monitors to identify the worst affected groups and areas while examining their needs in the context of normal livelihoods.

• **How the system was developed**

Initially, six local monitors (all men with educational backgrounds and work experience in agriculture or health) were recruited with the help of the local administration. A series of training sessions were held in the local area lasting from 3 to 6 days. Short follow-up seminars were held to check understanding, review progress and sharpen up techniques. Training included:

- **Methods of collecting qualitative information** using participatory research methods such as ranking, mapping and semi-structured interviews.
- **Methods of collecting quantitative information:** using rain gauges, market visits, recording price and sales information, calculating averages.
- **Interviewing techniques:** dealing with bias, objectivity and subjectivity, dealing with expectations, demonstration interviews, role-play interviews.
- **Report writing, checking, supervision duties.**
- **An introduction to emergency assessment** using an assessment checklist.

Monitors are deployed at two sites, each containing three monitoring areas. Each area covers a number of villages within reasonable cycling distance of the monitor's home. One monitor in each site acts as a focal point for

information. He has responsibility for supervising the other two and for coordinating the submission of reports.

Each monitor produces a fortnightly situational report which is examined and discussed in detail with an Oxfam project officer. The officer compiles a monthly report for each site summarising significant trends in indicators, highlighting areas of special interest and recommending possible courses of follow up or actions for the Oxfam programme. The findings are presented to the local district relief committee, made up of local and international NGOs, the civil administration and local chiefs. This forum is intended as a tool for discussion among those seeking to understand better the areas in which they work. Through monthly presentations of findings at committee meetings, coordination of any planned action can be facilitated.

• **Key Indicators**

The indicators chosen for monitoring cover the main sectors of the local economy, including: crop production, livestock, wild foods, resource management (water, grazing) and access to veterinary and health services. Indicators of social and cultural practices are also monitored.

These indicators help to provide a way of comparing the situations of different groups and areas and assessing changes in these over time. They were identified through consultation with community informants (women, chiefs, farmers, agriculturalists, health workers), selected with the help of local NGOs and the local administration, and through group discussions and ranking exercises (eg. of responses to food shortage, human and livestock diseases, means of exchange) with different socio-economic groups (widows, displaced, cattle owners, non-cattle owners).

The information collected is summarised in four report forms: rainfall, crop situation, livestock situation, community welfare (see Table 1). Rainfall is measured daily in the wet season using simple rain gauges installed in selected stations.

For each indicator a qualitative or quantitative entry is made on each form for each area, summarising findings from information

collected over the fortnight. Many of the indicators follow qualitative distinctions made in local Dinka terms (eg. grazing availability,

cattle movements). The sources of information used are noted along with explanatory or anecdotal remarks for each indicator.

Table 1. Indicators for livelihood monitoring

| Crop situation | Livestock situation | Community welfare |
|---|--|--|
| Crop development | Grazing availability | Water availability (for domestic use) |
| Crop damage | Water availability (for animal use) | Household food availability |
| Crop prices | Health status of "contact herd" | Foods consumed |
| Crop sales (selling/buying areas) | Cattle deaths | Responses to food shortage (eg. rationing, cash/food loans, famine foods, livestock sales) |
| Means of exchange (cash,cattle, smallstock, fish) | Animal disease outbreaks | Market commodity prices |
| | Auction prices | Disease outbreaks (human) |
| | Livestock sales | Migration (scale, composition, direction, reason) |
| | Livestock:grain barter rates | Cultural indicators (number of dances, marriages, funerals) |
| | Milk yields | |
| | Cattle slaughters | |
| | Cattle movements (scale, direction, purpose) | |

• Sources of information and PRA methods used

The Livelihood Monitoring System uses four key sources of information:

- Direct observation of homesteads, crops, granaries, cattle, and people's practices. Key sites in the area are visited on a regular basis eg. markets, livestock auctions, health clinics, water points. Observations are recorded in note-books on a daily basis and anything that appears unusual noted and reported.
- Contact farmers - to help gain an insight into the condition of crops, livestock and people in as manageable an area as possible, five farmers from five different villages are selected by each monitor. These 'contact farmers' become the focal points for gathering information about the area as a whole. The farmers chosen represent the major socio-economic groups in each area, including women, cattle owners, farmers with no livestock, fisherfolk, and the displaced. Farmers should also be able to demonstrate enthusiasm and reliability and be contactable on a regular basis.

Monitors visit each contact farmer at least once per fortnight. During each visit the monitor conducts a semi-structured interview, using the forms as a checklist, to compile information on key indicators.

- Herd tracking - given the importance of livestock as the primary assets of the Dinka economy, monitors keep a close tab on their movements, economic value and condition. This is achieved through a 'contact herd' belonging to a cattle owning contact farmer. Each monitor tracks the movements of one herd by holding regular interviews with the owner to discuss the composition, health condition, size and location of his herd (and other herds in the area). Periodic observation of the herd is made whenever possible to verify the information being supplied by the owner.

The indicator, 'Health status of contact herd', for example, is assessed with the

owner using proportional piling to identify the proportion of his herd that correspond to local classifications commonly used to describe animal health. Any change in proportion observed is used as a point for discussion and compared with other herds in the area. Recommendations are made for follow up by the local veterinary team. Regular contact with local Community Animal Health Workers helps to verify any suspected disease outbreaks.

- Key informants from the community are consulted to provide more in-depth knowledge of a particular group of people (eg. the displaced), or a topic of interest (eg. changes in livestock prices, cattle movements, crop prices, wild foods). Informants may include chiefs, representatives of the displaced, civil administrators, church leaders, elders, women, fishermen, auction clerks, and traders.

Monitors also meet regularly with local NGO agricultural, veterinary and health clinic staff in their areas for specialist advice on key indicators (eg. diagnosing crop damage, and animal and human disease outbreaks) as well as to help in cross-checking information and to elicit general comments on other indicators, eg. water and grazing availability.

Quantitative information (crop prices, auction prices, livestock sales, barter rates, market commodity prices) is collected through direct contact on a fortnightly basis with specific key informants who are able to supply such data. Using records kept by auction clerks, for example, monitors are able to work out fortnightly average prices, price ranges and the volume of sales for different animal types.

• Successes so far

1. The monitoring system has become an essential part of the Oxfam programme in Eastern-Bahr el Ghazal. It has built up Oxfam's knowledge of the area and has begun to feed into programme planning: information from livelihood monitoring feeds into the health, livestock and water programmes and each of these feeds into

the monitoring. Monitoring reports, for example, highlight areas of disease outbreaks to direct health inputs while Community Health Workers provide monitors with data on clinic attendance and reported diseases. By taking a holistic look at the community, the system enables a more integrated approach to planning to be developed.

2. The system provides Oxfam and other agencies with a more reliable base of information with which to identify and address food security issues and respond to food needs if necessary. Monitors have proved useful in complementing and updating the snapshot harvest forecasts and post-harvest assessments conducted by visiting teams. Their particular insight into different community groups has been essential for assessing food prospects and diagnosing the severity of shortages.
3. Local monitors have proved useful in being rapidly deployable to potential emergency areas (eg. to investigate rumours of migration, disease outbreaks or food shortages). In this way information gathering is flexible and responsive to need.
4. The Livelihood Monitoring System has been well received by the local community. It has been a useful tool in aiding discussion and collaboration between Oxfam, local NGOs, the local administration and traditional structures (chiefs). Community members have responded well to the opportunity to analyse their own situation *in their own time*, and particularly to express qualitative distinctions between households and groups that capture their own perceptions of 'difference'. In this way, PRA methods enhance the likelihood that plans for external assistance are more reliably informed by the real problems and needs of different members of the community.
5. It is the only system of information gathering in Southern Sudan that has trained local monitors. Training local people to collect information (as opposed to relying on whistle-stop 'assessment' visits by relief agency teams) means that

ongoing collection is possible and that local capacity can be enhanced and sustained.

• **Problems encountered and lessons learned**

The system began with an exhaustive list of indicators, some of these indicators initially chosen have since been stopped, as they proved more difficult to collect using PRA methods than originally envisaged (eg. child nutrition). New ones have been added and others modified to incorporate new insights into livelihood systems (eg. vegetable production, market commodity prices, livestock auction price ranges). This process of refinement and trimming is likely to continue as the system is developed. Indicators also need to be more finely tuned to the livelihood dynamics of particular groups within the community (eg. fisherfolk).

The quality of reporting among monitors was initially poor. This was inevitable, given that most were exercising their written English skills for the first time since the current war began. The concept and purpose of monitoring was well understood early on, but the importance of providing accurate, objective and detailed information over a discrete time period still requires repeated emphasis.

Collection of accurate qualitative information requires highly developed interviewing skills. Monitors need to develop these more fully, through training and close supervision. A key problem in interviewing has been the difficulty of trying to avoid raising expectations among respondents. This is accentuated when conducting preliminary emergency assessments, given people's raised expectation that relief items may be released and the tendency to concentrate on what relief items are needed rather than on what local response capacities remain intact.

The system relies on careful interpretation and analysis of information. At present, capacity and responsibility for this still rests with Oxfam. 'Ownership' of information therefore remains outside the community.

A more thorough understanding of local conditions is required before comprehensive

interpretation of monitoring data is made. Particularly needed is a clearer analysis of the position of women, fishing activities, access to livestock, kinship networks and systems of reciprocity.

At present, the 'household' remains a central unit of analysis. Information on households is therefore affected by the varying perceptions among monitors and respondents. A much clearer definition of household are needed as this is complicated by existence of polygamy and exogamy, extensive kinship networks, and often complex patterns of seasonal migration.

Analysis of the position of women is made especially difficult by the fact that, at present, all monitors are men. The system needs to facilitate the fuller participation of women as both monitors and informants. This is made difficult by the lack of formally educated women in the area.

• **Conclusion**

While the structure of the Livelihood Monitoring System has been established and useful reports produced, the system is still in its infancy. Further recruitment and training of monitors is required to expand PRA skills and improve the quality and coverage of reporting.

Its flexibility is its vital ingredient. It can be adapted on the basis of experience and the characteristics of different areas and different community groups. Indicators may be phased out if they prove less sensitive than originally thought. New indicators may be introduced if they strengthen the reliability and predictability of the system.

But the system has some way to go before it can provide accurate early-warning of emergencies. With the development of its analytical framework and increased geographical coverage, coupled with a degree of stability, it should be capable of responding to this challenge.

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