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The use of RRA to inform policy: observations from Madagascar and Guinea

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• Introduction

Over the past five years I have been involved in several initiatives using RRA¹ to inform policy decisions at the national level. In the two cases from which I draw examples here (Madagascar and Guinea), the governments were considering changes in the national land or resource management laws. USAID financed the services of the Land Tenure Center (LTC, University of Wisconsin) to provide technical assistance to the governments as they carried out their policy reviews. This article reflects on the potentials and pitfalls of using RRA case studies to inform policy discussions.

• Reasons to use RRA to inform policy discussions

RRA can bring village perspectives to the debate

Policy debate most often takes place between high level people of different opinions or between people at different levels of government. Rarely are the voices of people at the grassroots level heard explicitly in these

discussions. By listening to what local people have to say and looking at issues from their perspective, RRA helps policy analysts to focus on the real impact that policies have, or might have, on grassroots communities. RRA case studies add another dimension to policy debates and help to anchor any discussion in local realities.

RRA empowers local communities

Villagers who participate in an RRA study undertake a systematic analysis that addresses the impact of policies, or proposed policy, changes on their lives. Having done this, they are generally better able to discuss their situation and views in a logical and coherent fashion that policy makers can understand.

For example, in Guinea, representatives from communities that had been visited were invited to regional workshops. They expressed themselves eloquently and persuasively on the policies being discussed.

Village participants in the RRA studies frequently stated that, while they had in some sense 'known' all the pieces of information that were delivered to the team, they had never thought about it as a whole or contemplated its implications. This in itself can be empowering.

Following the RRA study in one Guinean village, villagers confronted the local authorities. They demanded that they cease abusing their rights on land distribution. They were supported in their claim by government officials who had been on the RRA team. It has been reported that the procedures have stopped, in that village and in the region.

¹ There is much confusion about the use of the terms RRA and PRA. I prefer to reserve the term PRA for an extended process in which community members (with or without outside collaborators) take the lead in carrying out studies of their situation and search for solutions to the problems that are identified. For me, RRA best describes discrete case studies, such as those described here, in which the objectives and format of the study are principally defined by outsiders. We should be clear, however, that community members were actively involved in these studies, which used a broad range of participatory techniques to elicit their views and their analyses.

RRA challenges preconceived notions

While many government officials have their roots in rural life, most have spent years (if not decades) in formal educational systems that belittle indigenous knowledge and 'backward' customary systems. In many cases, the principal frame of reference for these officials is not the local reality in their own country but Western, urban approaches. Some people are so entrenched in these Western/modern ways of thinking that no amount of alternative exposure can expand their horizons. For many, however, participation in RRA allowed them to reactivate their own cultural intuition and value their personal indigenous knowledge.

In Guinea, nearly all the officials we worked with began the process with the attitude that customary tenure systems no longer existed in their country. This assumption was challenged from the very first day of the first RRA. Over the course of a year, most of these functionaries came fervently to believe that customary tenure systems exist. Furthermore, they realised that they had to be acknowledged, or incorporated, in any revision of the land code.

Most of these officials must have 'known' at some level that customary tenure systems continue to exist in rural areas. Almost all hold land in rural communities or have close relatives who do so. And yet, they had been so oriented toward formal systems regulated by laws, codes, and decrees that those became their reality in spite of all their experiential knowledge to the contrary. Challenging long held assumptions was a discomfiting process. However, many officials ultimately seemed to find the process a liberating one. It exposed, acknowledged, and legitimised a reality that they had been expected to deny.

- **Linking RRA to the policy debate**

In both Guinea and Madagascar, a series of case studies was carried out over approximately a one-year period. In Guinea, after conducting several case studies in a region, a regional conference was held to discuss the cases and to integrate the views of local officials, NGO workers, etc. In Madagascar, the cases were discussed at a

national forum at the end of the case studies.

While the two projects took similar approaches, there was one notable difference: the composition of the research team. In both cases, the majority of the researchers were nationals, although LTC staff and consultants facilitated the process. They also provided methodological and research guidance throughout the process.

In Madagascar, the Malagasy team members were young professionals. They were selected for their experience with tenure issues, resource management, and their willingness to endure tough conditions and a demanding schedule. They came from diverse backgrounds (both academia and development) and were hired to conduct and write (with LTC staff) the series of case studies that would be presented to the government.

The Guinea project took a different and, I am now convinced, better approach. Most of the team members were mid- to upper-level government officials from a range of ministries responsible for writing and implementing the landcode. People were selected who: expressed an interest in the process, would play an active role in the policy debate, had the personality to work in a team and were willing to adopt the respectful and open-minded approach necessary for effective RRA. Nine people were selected who met these criteria. They undertook an initial training in RRA and tenure and participated in four case studies over the course of a one year period.

The key difference in the approaches was that in Madagascar we, as a team of outsiders, presented our results to government officials. We asked them to review the information and incorporate our findings into their policy decisions. Our success depended on the willingness of key government actors to accept the credibility of the information, and to internalise it in their deliberations. The LTC team was in the position of trying to 'sell' our information and our approach.

In Guinea, the research was undertaken by an influential subset of important decision makers within the government. They had been deeply

touched by what they had learned and were convinced of the importance and relevance of the information to the policy debate. Once the process was launched, LTC did not have to persuade anyone of anything. Instead, Guinean officials had the task of convincing their colleagues, based on their own experiences.

- **Advantages of including policy makers on the research team**

The learning process is more effective

Spending two weeks in an RRA study (or eight weeks in a series of studies) may not be the most efficient way for policy makers to learn but it is undoubtedly one of the most effective. Policymakers have and will continue to benefit from RRA reports prepared by outsiders for their consideration. But learning is more profound and lasting when it comes from personal experiences. From their first day in an RRA, policy makers begin questioning, reflecting, and debating at deeper levels as they confront real situations that challenge their orthodox views.

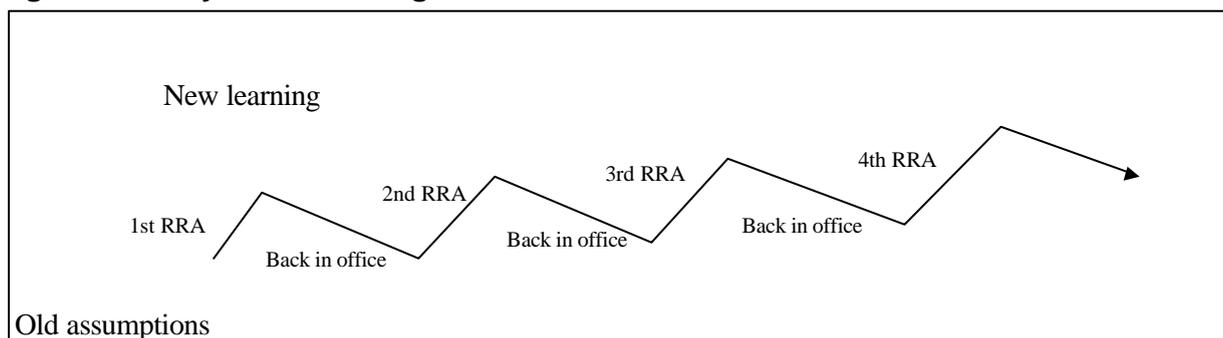
Our experiences highlight the importance of extending the learning process over a period of time. While one RRA can expose people to

new information, rarely is it sufficient to move them into new ways of thinking. This requires a more cumulative and reinforcing process. Officials are typically very excited by the information they gain during an RRA study. In most cases, however, when they return to their office and the dominant paradigm of their workplace and colleagues, they tend to revert back to their old habits and ways of thinking. There is progressive learning but the greatest gains are only evident after several field experiences (see Figure 1).

There is a trade-off between including a greater number of policymakers in RRAs or including fewer people, as we did in Guinea, but working with them over an extended period of time. Instead of taking nine people through four RRAs, we could have selected new team members each time. We would, therefore, have worked with over 30 officials during the year.

However, the amount of learning for those involved would have been significantly less. Which route is more effective probably depends on what is being studied: the more deeply entrenched the assumptions that are being challenged, the more important it is to prolong and reinforce the process of learning.

Figure 1. Policymaker learning curve



Perceptions of policymakers and villagers change dramatically

In many countries, relationships between villagers and government authorities have traditionally been adversarial. This was certainly the case in Guinea. The RRA provided a first opportunity for the two groups to sit together and discuss serious issues at length. The villagers were astounded that the officials were so 'human', approachable, and willing to listen. Government officials expressed equal disbelief about the hospitality and sophistication of the village populations.

The effects of increased dialogue cannot be measured in the short term. But these types of interactions can only be beneficial in promoting more approachable and responsive political systems.

The credibility of the study is increased

It is easy for sceptical officials to discount the information gathered by outside research teams if it does not meet their conventional (usually statistical) standards of rigour. But when the decision makers are the researchers, they have been personally exposed to the information and the rigorous qualitative process of gathering it. Hence, they are unlikely to question its validity. Indeed, many became fervent defenders of the studies in the face of more dubious colleagues.

• Linking policy studies to local action

Policy studies using RRA may contribute to the long-term well-being of local communities. However, many fail to provide immediate and tangible benefits to those who participate. Our studies attempted to address this issue by including NGO representatives on the teams, and ensuring that at least one came from the zone where the case study was carried out. This diversified perspectives. It also helped to ensure that information collected in the studies could be used immediately by local development practitioners.

There were numerous examples of this in both Guinea and Madagascar. In some cases, NGOs

stepped in to respond to specific needs identified in the studies. In others they refined and improved their projects on the basis of information gathered. In addition, in each feedback session to the village at the end of the RRA, the teams opened a discussion about how the information gathered might be used by the local community itself.

• Problems that arise in using RRA to inform policy

Sampling

One practical issue that arises from using RRA is the small number of sites that can be sampled by these intensive, qualitative methods. Good RRA takes resources: time, money, and (especially) energetic, inquisitive researchers.

Unless large numbers of people are brought into the process (which raises issues of quality control and the comparability of results across villages) the number of sites that can be sampled is limited. Even if multiple RRA teams are dispatched continuously, the number of sites will still be small compared to the total number of villages in most countries. It can be difficult to satisfy those who doubt anything that is not based on statistical significance.

While this issue continues to plague me, I have found that, in practice, it poses more of a conceptual than a real problem. In the studies with which I am familiar, most have sampled less than a dozen sites. Yet the results have been extraordinarily useful for decisionmakers. The key is not to view RRA sites as producing information that can be directly extrapolated to a larger population. Instead, the relevant question is 'what types of information are we getting and what sorts of issues are arising that need to be factored into the policy debate?'

In Guinea, for example, the local tenure systems varied dramatically from site to site. Perhaps the most impressive finding from the eight sites was the immense diversity that was observed. In each of the sites there was strong evidence that some sort of local/customary/traditional tenure system was active.

If national policies failed to consider both the existence and diversity of these systems, the consequences would be serious. Since policy makers had begun the study process denying that local tenure systems existed (and therefore had no intentions of even considering them in writing the new texts) this in itself was a major finding.

RRA is highly effective at understanding the reasons why people behave in one way or another. This should be a critical concern in policy discussions. However, RRA is less effective in understanding the scope of certain practices across a region or country. When used to inform policy, it is therefore often most effective when it is combined with other methods that are more effective at capturing this broader spatial dimension.

These other methods may include quantitative surveys, which can be used to address key questions across a broad population, or remote sensing techniques (e.g. satellite imagery or aerial photography) which detect issues such as land use patterns across broader areas. Surveys and remote sensing are effective at providing rather superficial information across large areas or populations. RRA can provide much greater depth in a limited number of sample sites. Combining these methodologies gives policy analysts an attractive combination of range and depth of information.

Cost

RRA is generally considered as cost effective relative to more drawn out research methods. However, the costs of undertaking a series of well conceived and implemented RRAs across several regions and involving a sizeable number of people is high. Precise costs vary from country to country. But the overall expense of gathering this type of information and sharing it in regional or national level policy workshops is not insignificant.

The expense involved often means that one of the major donors is involved. This usually implies a certain political agenda as well as dependence on the donor's continued interest. Both of these can be problematic.

Working with policymakers

I advocate the inclusion of policy makers in research but I acknowledge that this is not the easiest approach. Some of the problems are logistical. Others are related to potential government reorganisations and restructuring. For example, in Guinea, we were confronted by ministerial changes part way through the process. This meant that our carefully selected representatives of key ministries changed posts.

More difficult problems relate to experience, attitudes and assumptions. It is certainly easier to work with a hand picked team of people who already have experience in research, field work, participatory approaches, etc.. Most of the policy makers with whom we worked had village roots, but some had never spent a night in a village. Certain team members spent more time defending their ministerial interests and trying to impose their views on the rest of the group than listening to what villagers were telling us. But all these problems worked themselves out as the process advanced. In the end the benefits of working directly with policy makers far outweighed the difficulties and challenges that the approach entailed.

- **Credibility of qualitative methods**

The purpose of conducting these RRA studies was to inform a policy debate and turn policymakers attentions to the implications of their decisions on rural populations. But research can only have this impact if the results are viewed as credible and worthy of consideration.

RRA results often contradict the orthodox perspective or challenge entrenched interests. The reaction of the challenged party is invariably to question the methodology or approach. This usually involves questioning the small number of sites and the credibility of information that is obtained by 'informal' tools such as participatory mapping (as opposed to precise cartographic representations).

I do not resent people challenging participatory research. Given the poor quality of many RRAs, people are fully justified in questioning how the methods have been used. This means that researchers must be rigorous

in their fieldwork so that they can convincingly defend their use of the methodology. This requires that deliberate and systematic steps are taken to ensure that methodological principles are followed with the greatest attention and the process is well documented.

It is important to carefully explain the process by which the sites were selected. Efforts to reduce bias, through triangulation of team members, village respondents, and the use of diverse tools must be demonstrated. These explanations defuse most criticisms of the methods, allowing people to focus on the substantive results of the work. Where information from other methods (surveys or remote sensing techniques) can be brought in to corroborate particular aspects of the qualitative findings, this helps to further persuade the doubters.

Including village representatives in meetings where case studies are discussed can provide a powerful validation of research findings. In more than one instance, villagers have leapt to the defence of the research team.

In one case a doubting official suggested in a regional workshop that the findings from the study could not be accurate. A village elder was quick to respond. He proceeded, with great dignity, to refute the challenge, noting that the team had conducted a serious study that captured the reality of their village. He added that he would be happy to take the bureaucrat (or any others who doubted the results) back to his village to show them the situation. I don't think the official took him up on his offer, but neither did he cause any further problems during the workshop!

- **In conclusion: the challenges of confronting complexity**

The implicit assumption in this paper is that the results of RRA studies will help policy makers in their decision making. I will end these reflections by noting that the result is exactly the opposite. It is much easier for policy makers to make decisions without information from RRAs. Good RRAs expose competing interests, challenge orthodox

assumptions, and reveal complexities that make decision-making very difficult.

One can only hope that policy makers who have access to greater information can struggle through the challenge of using it to improve their decisions. A further (and perhaps even more optimistic hope) is that they will use this information to become more responsive to poorer rural peoples. It is their concerns that have been consistently ignored or misunderstood in policy deliberations.

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NOTES

The author served as a consultant to both these projects, participating in project design, training participants in RRA and leading the first of the case studies in each country. Additional information and copies of the case studies can be obtained from The Land Tenure Center, 1357 University Avenue, Madison, WI 53715 USA or from the LTC principal investigators Julie Fischer (Guinea) and Andrea Robles or Steve Leisz (Madagascar) in care of LTC.