

Different perspectives: experiences with RRA in Zambezi District, Zambia

by Bart Pijenburg and Daniëlla de Winter,

with a response by Bara Gueye

• **Introduction**

This article reflects on our experiences with RRA in Zambezi District, Zambia. We came across unexpected problems that we feel need to be addressed in the participation debate. The article starts with background information on the area which may explain peoples' attitude towards outside intervention. We then describe problems related to the interaction between researchers and farmers and our different perspectives on the RRA exercise.

• **Zambezi district**

Zambezi is located in a remote corner of Zambia. Colonial power was established relatively late (1907) and services, such as health care and education, were provided by missionaries up until the 1950s. After independence in 1964, the government followed an ambitious programme to develop the agricultural sector in the rural areas (co-operatives, credit schemes, marketing boards, tractor schemes etc.).

Few of these projects were successful, partly because of the remoteness of the district. However, the interventions were ultimately unsustainable because they were highly subsidised by a state whose national economy was deteriorating each year.

From 1979, a large German funded Integrated Rural Development Project was active in the area. The project had many components, including: an oxen programme, subsidised crop

marketing and agricultural inputs, credit schemes, water wells, improved markets for honey and wax and the establishment of rural workshops etc.. In principle, the project was implemented through existing local institutions and government departments. However, the local population accredited the project successes to 'the Germans'. In the late 1980s, support for agricultural credit, input supply, oxen and crop marketing was taken over by a Dutch funded project. This project ceased abruptly in 1991.

While the projects had success in terms of increased agricultural output (especially maize and rice production), the improvements were not sustained after the projects ended. Credit schemes from both the government and external donors were highly subsidised and even had negative interest rates (inflation rate higher than interest rates). Thus, the demand for credit by farmers was overwhelming. Farmers quickly developed an attitude whereby they proposed more and new loans as a panacea for their problems. As a result, high expectations were raised from agricultural development projects.

• **The RRA study**

Given the historical legacy of projects in the area, a study was commissioned by the SNV Zambia/Netherlands Development Organisation. The objective was to examine farmers' problems and priorities and identify possible project interventions for SNV and other donors. Three researchers with experience in RRA (the authors plus a Zambian counterpart) undertook six RRAs in the district, each lasting one week.

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The study was undertaken in collaboration with various government departments and two local NGOs. The study made use of a range of RRA tools, including: interviews, group discussions, calendars (food availability, data on cattle, fishing and labour calendars), daily routines and activity profiles, case studies (household histories and cattle herd histories), maps and transects. A report was written for each RRA.

After the six RRAs were completed, a one-day workshop was organised for all the RRA team members. We made problem trees and identified causes for farmers' problems.

• **Expectations**

During the fieldwork we came across several difficulties. These related to the different expectations that farmers and the RRA team had of the study. At times, an open and constructive dialogue was difficult to achieve.

From the outset, we tried not to raise local expectations. Each time we met villagers, we explained that we had come to learn about the area and farmers' priorities for further agricultural development. We stated clearly that we had no means nor power to decide on any future material assistance. We said we could only give recommendations to others.

• **Demand for more-of-the-same**

To the villagers, our team was seen as representing the government and donors. The arrival of white people with Zambian counterparts and big cars indicated the presence of a project. This may explain why the problems and solutions listed by the villagers seemed to be defined by what they had seen in earlier state or donor interventions. There was a strong tendency to ask for more of the same (credit, fertiliser, oxen, ploughs on credit, water wells, schools, shops and health centres etc.).

• **Shopping lists**

Generally, it was difficult to discuss and prioritise problems. Instead farmers said "we need a shop" or "we need oxen and ploughs", providing a 'shopping list' of ideas. These may have reflected some of the priority problems.

But, this was a rather unsatisfactory way of defining problems. It reflected only farmers' material wishes for government or donor material assistance instead of real problems.

Finding root causes of the problems became a tiresome and difficult task. Farmers tended to formulate problems in words of "We need ..." or "There is a lack of ...". For example cattle diseases were not the problem, rather the "lack of veterinary drugs" was identified as a key constraint. Problems of land preparations were in the first instance presented as "lack of oxen and ploughs".

The team decided to reformulate farmers' shopping lists into problems to enable a brainstorming of alternative solutions. But this sometimes lead to ridiculous discussions (see Box 1). It shows the danger of researchers trying to interpret farmers' statements.

BOX 1

In one village, farmers expressed a need for barbed wire. The team tried to redefine this desire into a problem. It was reformulated as "unavailability of labour for herding cattle". Now the team had phrased it as a problem, they were better able to come up with possible solutions. One of the possible solutions proposed by the team was "group herding so that farmers can share the cost of a herdsboy".

Later we found out that farmers wanted to use the barbed wire for their kraal (night paddock) and not for fencing grazing paddocks. The whole discussion had been rather senseless. We should have asked farmers why they needed the barbed wire in the first place.

• **A beyond farmer-first explanation**

The way farmers defined their wishes may reflect their expectations. Farmers longed to go back to the good old days' when projects delivered fertilisers and seed on cheap credit. They wanted to discuss why fertiliser was no longer subsidised and credit no longer available. They defined lack of fertiliser as a priority problem rather than brainstorming on causes of declining soil fertility.

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The farmers did not see us as partners to discuss problems and their causes. Instead they saw us as representatives of projects which were supposed to provide the services.

• **Conclusions**

The RRAs generated valuable data and resulted in development proposals. These proposals were based on priorities given by farmers but formulated by the team of researchers. The farmers and research team appreciated the RRA approach, the sharing and discussing of results and proposals was valued highly.

In this respect, our experience with RRA methodologies are positive. But we have also learnt that it is not easy to put it into practice. It's success is highly dependent on the attitude and skills of team members. This is nothing new for practitioners. However, we also feel that that the attitudes and expectations of farmers affect the RRA experience and can inhibit an open and fruitful dialogue. We perceived the following problems:

- Expectations were so easily raised and so hard to temper.
- It was difficult to get farmers to list priority problems and their causes. Instead we received shopping lists which required outside material support.
- The shopping lists tended to define priorities in terms of items or support which earlier interventions had brought to them.

An RRA cannot be seen as an exercise on its own. At least the farmers do not see it in this way. They have experience with outside intervention. Since many projects brought short term benefits, farmers have learned to capitalise on opportunity when it arrives. In short, the farmers' extensive prior project experience made them expectant of imminent project activities.

This is where we see the conflict. In our view, we tried hard to establish an open dialogue to identify problems and brainstorm on solutions. But the farmers wanted us to provide them with wells, health centres, schools and loans for cattle, fertilisers ploughs etc. It was very hard to

bridge the gap between the two different views on the exercise.

• **Recommendations**

Since writing this article, we have tried to think about different ways of enhancing the role of farmers in project activities. Some of these may seem rather obvious, but they reflect our way of discovering the need for a more participatory approach.

- *Bring the WE and THEY closer together.* We need to involve local people more, particularly the community representatives in the research process.
- *RRA should be part of a process.* The RRA should not be an activity in itself. One RRA may not be sufficient to define priorities for possible development interventions. Instead, it should be part of a process approach, whereby the exercise is the beginning of a dialogue between the outside agency and the community.
- *Prevent shopping lists.* We needed to take more time to analyse and discuss the root causes of ranked problems.
- *Prevent high expectations.* A proper introduction, explaining objectives and defining clearly what the RRA team can and cannot do is vital. This is especially important where the RRA is linked to an outside agency. The agency must make it clear what they have to offer and what are their expectations of what local people must contribute in return, e.g. in terms of time, labour etc..

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• **Different perspectives: a response by Bara Gueye.**

As in most African countries, the rural development programme initiated in the Zambezi region in the 1960s was characterised by a centralised, top-down approach. This inhibited local communities' knowledge and

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initiatives. Even the 1970s integrated rural development projects did not bring much change to the situation. Under the umbrella of integration, they actually strengthened the vertical approach to development. In the Zambezi case, ownership of project achievements fell into the hands of the external funding agency, rather than the local community.

The historical development background can influence the interaction between an RRA team and the local communities. Local people are accustomed to playing the role of 'expecters' rather than active planners and implementers. Moreover, some of the problems encountered may have stemmed from the way the RRA study was designed. It is important to remember that RRA can be as extractive as any other methodology or approach, if its underlying principles are not fully taken into account.

In this case, it is very likely that the team set the research agenda and participation by the communities was more of a means (to gather information) than an end. When local communities are not involved in the research objective setting and implementation, ownership becomes difficult. Local expressions of expectations become a way of getting trade-offs. In this case, people's expectations are normal because they can hardly understand why the team is interested in knowing their priorities, if they do not have any solutions to them.

Transparency and objective setting are also very important. In a participatory process, the communities should be aware of the objectives of the work long before the team's arrival in the field. More importantly, they should be in a position to decide whether they feel comfortable in participating in the study. Usually, they are put in a position whereby they have no option but to accept the team. This often leads to lack of interest and involvement.

Expectations and 'demand for more of the same' probably depend less on the team composition than people's roles and interaction between the team and the community. The local people did not feel like active partners but rather passive information providers. Since local populations cannot anticipate 'what the

outsiders real intentions are', they tend to draw a long and diversified shopping list. They hope that at least a few of these 'needs' fall into the outsider's agenda for action.

In conclusion, participation cannot be achieved only through methods. Methods are just a means, not an end. In designing participatory research, it is essential that the objectives and agenda are set jointly by the communities and the team of facilitators. Furthermore, as the authors note, the process should be linked to on-going development action. Otherwise *ad hoc* 'participatory' research may yield little, if any, impact.

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NOTE

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