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Extracts

- ## The price of rice: exploring the meaning behind the data

This extract originates from a 3 month field study carried out under the auspices of ICRA[1] and Ministry of Agriculture, Research and Training, Uyole in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania. The study site was in Kyela district, where farming systems are dominated by a single rice based cropping pattern. Revenue from rice sales accounts for 20-45% of household income according to proportional pie diagrams constructed by farmers. One of the issues that dominated our discussions was farmers' concerns over the low selling price of rice. We decided to explore the underlying reasons for this through the construction of calendars.

One group of farmers was requested to make a calendar of relative variations in the selling price of rice, together with an estimate of the quantity of rice sold over the year using beans. Another group of farmers was requested to recall the actual prices they received for rice. The information was then compiled into a single diagram which formed the basis for discussion (Figure 1).

The reasons behind farmers' perceptions that they receive a 'perennial low farm gate price for paddy rice' became evident as we discussed the diagram. Lowest prices are evident, as expected, during peak harvest season (May to July) with higher prices occurring during the lean months of March and April. At this time, the farm gate price for rice is about 250% more than in the harvest season. Farmers dispose of their rice when price is lowest. Post harvest constraints and cash obligations (e.g. school fees) force them to sell rather than wait for higher prices.

Actual price during the peak harvest season though low was relatively stable during the period May to July. However, a more sudden drop was indicated for the same period by farmers who constructed the calendars using beans. Heated debate revealed the reason behind this difference.

The group who gave the actual price of rice were basing their estimates on the prices in local markets, whereas those constructing the calendar of relative prices were basing it on prices received at the farm gate. During the peak harvest season traders come from outside the area and buy up rice in huge quantities - at low prices. Farmers say they are often forced to sell, rather than risk the chances of being unable to sell in the market.

The final aspect of farmers' perceptions of low farm-gate prices can be attributed to the comparison by farmers of differences between the farm gate prices they receive for rice and the retail price for milled rice in the nearby town of Kyela. A case study of a rice farmer was carried out to relate farm gate transactions to the retail market. The farm gate price was found to be only 33 % of retail price and farmers perceive that a large percentage of the difference accrued mainly on middlemen profit.

This simple example illustrates the value of using PRA tools to rapidly assemble qualitative and quantitative information on market prices. It demonstrates the importance of farmers' knowledge in exploring the meaning behind the data generated using PRA methodologies.

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[1] The International Centre for development orientated Research in Agriculture.

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Figure 1. Fluctuations in the price of paddy rice
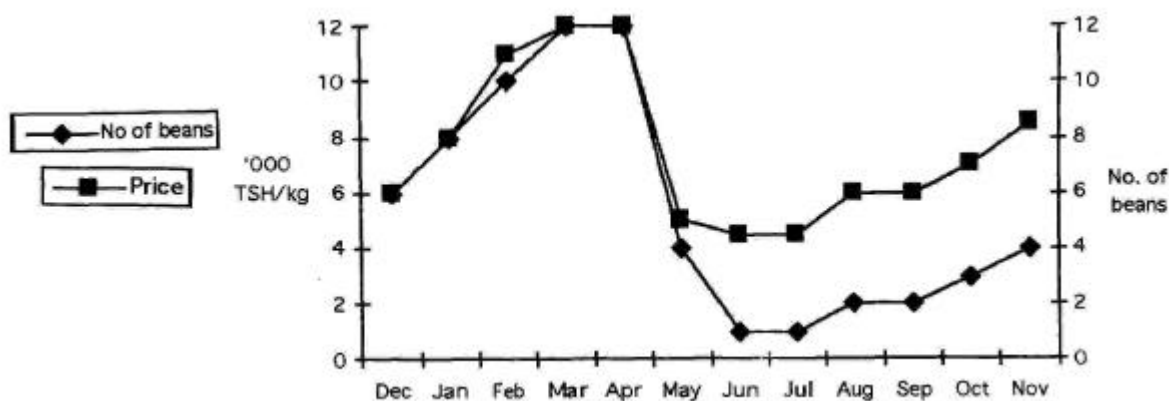
The structural adjustment programmes of the early 1990s led to a rapid increase in the trading of agricultural produce within Tanzania. However, low rice prices and the increasing cost of inputs (notably fertiliser) threaten the future of rice production. One solution may develop through participatory research on new rice varieties (e.g. high yielding or varieties suited to low fertility conditions). Another option is the establishment of storage and milling facilities at the local level to increase the value of the marketed product.

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- **Participatory project evaluation among dryland dwellers**

We have recently tested a method among pastoralists in Northern Kenya to develop indigenous indicators and criteria for project evaluation. This was part of a process of revisiting our own rationale for participation.

Firstly, we simply listened to people's project descriptions to get an idea of what is, and what is not, important to them. This exercise revealed a number of discrepancies between the project's intentions and people's expectations. The pastoralists expressed clearly their disappointment about their non-involvement in project decision making. In fact, none of the so-called `participatory projects' strived for true partnership.

We then added a series of short questions, such as 'Do you know why the project is here?'. To the question, 'Do you know why the project wants to help you?', one Ariaal pastoralist responded `Maybe they *think* we have a problem'. Subsequently, we asked the pastoralists to compare, rank and contrast the various activities of all six programmes operating in their area. From the narratives and comparative analysis of the projects, we were able to extract meaningful indicators and criteria to be used for participatory project appraisal.

Our research results have been compiled in a manual which is available from UNEP or ELCI (Environmental Liaison Centre International). The guide provides a methodological basis for development agencies to examine:

- whether the project objectives are understood by the target group;
- to what extent the activities contribute to the achievement of project objectives as perceived by local communities; and,

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- to what extent the activities meet priorities as defined by people living in the communities.

The first results have proved very interesting regarding community perceptions of their environment. Not only do local people see things very differently from project staff, but there is also a difference of perception among the various stakeholders within the community.

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The manual is available free of charge from either:

UNEP-DEDC/PAC, P O Box 30552, Nairobi, Kenya
Fax: + 254 2 623 284
or ELCI, P O Box 72461, Nairobi, Kenya
Fax: + 254 2 562 175

- ## Using names as a guide to past ecology and land use practices

Environmental conditions and change are often recorded in folk tales. These are passed down to future generations and help younger generations build up a picture of the past and consider on how things have changed. Folk tales reflect peoples' knowledge of their environment. In the same way, the name of a place is often determined by sociocultural and ecological factors. These factors can be used to learn more about the history of a site and, ultimately, assist in environmental education and conservation. I would like to illustrate this with examples from a range of communities in Kenya.

Naming in African Communities. This is a special social occasion in many African communities which gives a child an identity and relates it to the clan or family. The name often depicts local circumstances or conditions. For example, among the Kamba community, an individual's name can identify the season when the child was born. A female child born in the famine may be called *Wayua*, while a male child born during the rainy season is called *Wambua*.

Places named after plants. Places are often named after a dominant tree or a tree of special significance to a community. Often, the tree is no longer present but the name continues. A group discussion might help to remind people about the history of their village. For example, Napetet is a village in Turkana. Apetet is the local name for *Acacia nubica,* which used to be abundant in the area but have since been cleared for settlement. This information would be useful for tree planting programmes.

Places named after animals. Places may be named after animals found near the site. For example, Mbusyani in Kikamba means 'the place of rhinos'. Mbusyani is now a densely populated village with a shopping centre! There are few signs of its recent past, except to those who know the meaning of the name.

Plants named after their role. If an exotic species is introduced to a village, the local community will experiment with it for firewood, timber, medicine etc. An introduced plant that is found to be similar to an existing indigenous species is often given the same name. For example, the Kamba favour the indigenous *Cassia singueana* (*Mukeengeka*) for firewood as it coppices easily. The introduced *C. siamea* and *C. spectabilis* have the same name as they are used for the same purpose.

Indigenous knowledge of the local environment and its history may be explored using PRA approaches, such as group discussions, key informant interviews with older people and transect walks. Naming illustrates the strong relationship between culture and the environment. Names can be used as an entry point to formulate dialogue within the community and help reconstruct the changing ecology and land use practices. The local information gathered can help raise local interest in environmental issues. In particular, a clear explanation of a name and its link with the past, could be used in environmental education activities with children.

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- ### Insider and outsider voting: reflections from Scotland

For shorter PRA fieldwork sessions organised as part of training courses, it is common to end with a general meeting. This provides the facilitators and participants with an opportunity to provide feedback on the previous days. In many cases, some form of voting is carried out to prioritise issues identified. This may be achieved through group scoring or by individual voting.

In one case, the villagers identified the topic 'quality of village life'. They then noted eight significant issues which affect this in a negative way. These were written on large pieces of coloured card and placed on the floor in the middle of the circle of participants and facilitators. Local people were then given 6 beans each and asked to identify which were the most significant issues. They could place the beans on any combination of cards, from all beans on one card, to one bean on each of six cards. In this way everybody voted, and an idea of the group feeling was also obtained.

There was only a handful of local people present at this final meeting. It was the culmination of an afternoon's display and the team had had discussions with many others during the day. With only eleven participants, people could have become self conscious while voting, particularly as there were an equal number of trainee facilitators sitting around the circle, watching. With a greater number of people, this type of voting is more anonymous, as well as more fun, and the facilitators would have time to move away.

At this point, there was an instant decision that the facilitators should also be involved in the voting process. Beans were handed to both groups, with red beans to the trainees and white beans to the local people. The trainee voting was spontaneous, as they had not prior warning of this change in events! While the local people expressed their own priorities, the facilitators voted according to how they thought the community would prioritise issues, in the light of the understanding gained through the previous few days of fieldwork.

There were no divisions between insiders and outsiders except for bean colour. There were fewer barriers, and more laughter. Everybody had an opportunity to express an opinion, and the trainees could reflect on what they had learned.

The benefits of this process were clear. Firstly, voting by the locals was not compromised, as the different colours of beans indicated clearly the local opinions. This led to a discussion on priorities, which could be used as an entry point to discussing the development of action plans.

Secondly, the voting provided a strong visual tool for comparing insiders' and outsiders' perceptions. This can indicate the accuracy of the impressions gained by the facilitators. The local people were interested in how we had voted and commented on the few cases where the numbers of beans differed. This led a detailed discussion about the issues and the process. It illustrated the importance of transparency and encouraging local feedback. As part of a training exercise, this opened up an analysis of PRA, focusing initially on the similarities and differences in facilitators' and insiders' opinions.

This approach was spontaneous but requires further thought. For example, are either group influenced by the other (might participants follow or contradict facilitator voting, or facilitators allow themselves to be influenced by local opinions expressed at the time)? How well can facilitators separate their own preconceptions of the issues and vote according to what they have learned (this has great potential as a training tool)? Despite these and other issues, this is an interesting way to compare insider/outsider perceptions, discuss the potential of PRA, ensure facilitators understand the issues and provoke focused discussions.

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