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Interviews and groups

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• The use of RRA interview schedules within a collaborative research project in Northern Thailand

The research project described in these notes is entitled 'The role of Rural Peoples' Organisations in agricultural development in Northern Thailand'. It is a collaborative research project involving the AERDD, University of Reading and the Department of Agricultural Extension, University of Chiang Mai (CMU). Phase I was concerned with identifying the range and characteristics of Rural Peoples' Organisations (RPOs) in Northern Thailand. The research methodology of this phase of the work revolved round the use of conventional survey questionnaires to provide a census of RPOs in the nine Provinces of this part of Thailand. Phase II of the research project centres round eight 'case studies' designed and implemented by four separate teams of staff. Each team comprises both AERDD and CMU staff. The two case studies with which I have been involved have been concerned with a comparative analysis of 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' Paddy Farmer Groups (PFGs) in the Provinces of Nan and Lampoon. The rest of these notes explain how for this stage of the research an RRA approach evolved and the coverage of the Interview Schedules. An assessment of the use of these Interview Schedules will be given separately.

I did not go to Northern Thailand with the conscious intention of using RRA. However, time constraints, the nature of the research, problems experienced in the use of the Phase I survey questionnaires and the practical difficulties in achieving collaborative research all resulted in the design of a research approach that utilised key elements of an RRA approach.

There were a number of advantages in the use of an RRA approach. First, it enabled a defined problem to be explored in a flexible but structured way taking into account perspectives from a range of farmers and officials. Second, it enabled a great deal of work to be done during a relatively short field period in Thailand - important given the difficulties faced in achieving effective 'collaboration' in the research work. Third, the approach enabled a balance between data collection, interpretation and analysis to be achieved during the field visit itself. Fourth, the approach led to and was able to incorporate a variety of secondary data sources e.g., reports from the Co-operative Inspection Office. Finally, the use of an RRA approach identified and compensated for some the unreliability of the Phase I data which had used conventional survey research methodologies.

Three semi-structured interview schedules were designed for the Phase II work with the Paddy Farmer Groups. First, an interview schedule for the paddy Group Committee. Second, an interview schedule with the Kaset Tarnbon (village level extension worker). Third, an interview schedule with the Kaset Arnphur (district extension officer). A major objective was to assess the relative 'success' or 'failure' of the Paddy Farmer groups from these three different perspectives. The fourth perspective, that of the farmers themselves, is being assessed by the use of questionnaires by CMU staff and is not discussed in these notes. However, the design of this questionnaire was aided considerably by the preceding RRA interview schedules.

1. Interview Schedule for the Paddy Group Committee

Source: RRA Notes (1989), Issue 7, pp.15–23, IIED London

After two initial tables designed to obtain information on the villages, committee members and farmers in these groups this interview schedule divided into six main sections. These were Agro-economic background to the village and tambon (sub-district); Background History of the Paddy Group; Activities of the Paddy Group; Participation by members; Economic background to the paddy Group; Factors affecting the success/failure of the Paddy Group.

2. Interview Schedule for the Kaset Tambon

   This included Length of service in the extension department and in the tambon; Age and education background; Division of work between extension and non-extension work; Most important crops for the farmers; Main problems for the farmers and for their extension work; Details of their work with each of the different types of RPO; Links (if any) between the RPOs and T&V extension; Instructions/training from the district extension office regarding working with RPOs; which types of RPOs the least successful in the tambon and why?

3. Interview Schedule with the Kaset Amphur, including Agro- economic background to the District; Extension policy re: Farmer Groups, Housewives Groups and Natural Groups; Extension Policy regarding the Paddy Farmer Groups; Official view regarding the relative 'success' or 'failure' of the Paddy Groups.

Some preliminary results from the Paddy Group Committee interview schedule are shown in the attached chart. The chart shows data for two successful paddy groups (success) and five unsuccessful paddy groups (US). The RRA interviews showed that the great majority of these farmer groups were not operating effectively, were heavily indebted, had experienced a great turnover of officials and were largely ignored by an extension service which concentrates on the few successful PFGs or utilises other types of group extension purposes.

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Source: RRA Notes (1989), Issue 7, pp.15–23, IIED London

SOME RESULTS FROM COMMITTEE INTERVIEWS

	LANPHUN			NAN			
	Success	Success	US	US	US	US	US	US
Date formed	1976	1977	1975	No	1976	1975	1975	1982
No. villages	13	10	10	Data	10	6	3	4
No. members	446	270	416	Coll.	121 (267)	101	70	115
No. agric. units	8	14	10 (NF)		10 (NF)	-	-	-
Com. members	6	6	6		6	5	6	5
CM:from no.vills	5	NA	3		3	4	3	3
CM:occupations	farmers	3 F + T 3 farmers	2 F + T/l orchard 1 Teach/F, 2 farmers		2 F + other 4 farmers	farmers	farmers	2 F + T 3 farmers
CM:official positions	-	(Kamnan	Assist.V.H.		-		Manager MDC	V.H.H./Kamnan
CM:in other groups	2F.A.	(CM/FA	7 F.A.		2 Agric. Coops	2 Agric. Coop	5 BAAC	-
CM: turnover	no change	no change	five x 2 one x 3		three x 3 two x 1	two x 2 three x 1	no change	two x 2 three x 1
Group:started by	KA	Vill.H.H./Doc.	Kamnan		KA	KA	KA	KA
Frequency C. meetings	monthly	5/7 a year	1 a year		6 a year	2 a year	6 a year	2 a year
K.A. attends	sometimes	all meetings	no		no	sometimes	sometimes	attends
K.A. meetings	5/6 a year	4/5 a year	3 a year		2 a year	1 a year	1 a year	-
Planning	annual meeting	committee	no activities		no activities	no activities	no activities	no activities
Cash credit	no	yes (little)	no		no	no	no	no
Fertilizer credit	yes	yes	no		no	no	no	no
Defaulting	little	no	yes - AMC/BAAC		yes/AMC	yes/AMC	yes/AMC	yes
Group income	share Y sales fert/herb	share Y shop/market	share Y		share Y	share Y	share Y	share Y
Group problems	some default. attendence meetings	none	defaulting		defaulting selfish/ dishonest members	little K thought fert. free	defaulting middlemen V.H. no interest	defaulting middlemen
Group solutions	godown	already OK	start longon group		selling inputs for cash	-	If K could market	new com.

• Farmer groups and ITK in Benin

In most cases, young field researchers do not reach all their goals, or have to modify goals and methodologies during their field research, but very few try to expose clearly the difficulties encountered so that other fieldworkers can benefit from their experience.

I report here on field surveys which have been conducted in an integrated rural development project in the south of Benin. The aim of these surveys was to identify problem areas so that appropriate subjects for research and extension activities for the project could be formulated, as well as to find out about indigenous technical knowledge (ITK) which could be developed further. Emphasis was to be put on areas of ITK concerned with management of soil fertility and sustainability. To reach a holistic understanding of the major problems, factors and their relationships without spending years collecting and processing data, we agreed that discussions and the qualitative point of view of farmers were to be preferred to comprehensive whole-farm data sets.

The team of agronomists, agricultural officers and extension workers asked farmers encountered in the fields and villages to participate in a discussion either on problems at the whole farm level or on agronomic topics. Informal groups were built without difficulty and farmers described their farms and discussed their main problems. These groups focussed on production and on cropping systems, and produced information on resources, activities, outputs together with some indicators on bush-fallow performance. These were to be examined more systematically: the main challenge farmers have to face is the development of more intensive cropping and production systems which remain sustainable, as time for bush fallowing is getting shorter.

This approach can be summarised through the device of the survey team: ‘learn from the farmers and about them.

• Difficulties of assessment by researchers

To elicit possible changes in the land use we stratified eventually the province according to ecological impoverishment patterns. Even then, the picture about the adjustments farmers are practising was still confusing, mainly because we had not conducted discussions with groups stratified on a socio-economic basis.

If this survey was to be prepared again then:

- These broad discussions would be conducted with a smaller number of groups, instead of aiming at an accurate geographical coverage. Thereafter some more topical discussions could take place.
- Even if we got some insight into regional differences in land use and cropping patterns, it would have been more efficient if a few areas had been selected regarding the main agroecological indicators and if we had surveyed the land use patterns in relation to region (land scarcity, soil fertility, climate, etc.) and to the socio-economic situation of different kinds of farmers in these regions.
- Moreover, we should also have let the farmers evaluate the performance of their different cropping systems: for example according to the frequency and period of scarce food and cash, to labour peaks *in* the calendar.
- Finally we should have returned to the villages with the conclusion on different cropping systems which we drew from farmers' assessments about the performance of these systems and with our own opinions concerning their sustainability. On this basis we could have discussed with farmers about further work on a sound basis.

Reflections about our approach to tapping ITK

In the first stage, the team developed a general attitude towards farmers of learning from them

Source: RRA Notes (1989), Issue 7, pp.15–23, IIED London

and questioning what they are doing. It was a healthy reaction to usual attitudes, where farmers are considered as backward illiterates reluctant to accept change. Emphasis was put on looking for rationality and knowledge in what farmers are doing.

In fact we could only be amazed about farmers' sound knowledge about their environment, soils and plants. Farmers have also been very active in screening new cassava varieties and were more efficient and quicker in finding CMV resistant, sweet and early varieties than the research and extension programmes.

There is also some evidence that we, and other farmers, could learn from some of the better farmers. These must be better farmers because they succeed in allocating their own resources in order to solve their problems of scarcity, or because they develop better technical skills, or because they adjust faster than other farmers to changes, and not because they have access to more resources.

Yet a difficulty in assessing problems and solutions with farmers is their location specific knowledge: they cannot be aware of problems if they cannot compare situations where these problems are occurring and not occurring. In addition farmers often only mention problems for which they know potential solutions (other topics are not problems but hazards). Asking farmers about changes in composition of fallow showed that they have a very sound knowledge about its dynamics, that they know plants which they think are able to let soil recover faster than the others and that some of these plants are multipurpose trees; but they never thought about planting these trees as they do not foresee that these species will disappear or, even if they do, thy feel helpless as they never saw anybody planting that kind of tree and would not know how to do it.

RRA is a very useful way of helping scientists to learn about farmers' concerns, which are mainly problems of short term scarcities. It should not prevent scientists from developing their own appraisal on the systems according to their own concerns, which are linked to long term sustainability. In conclusion, RRA is a good instrument to discuss possible changes, but the team would have gained more experience by coming back to the villages for further discussions: later experiences show that it leads to a sound consensus on further possible solutions which can be experimented or tried. Some of these resolutions could have been 'on farm' experiments, some might have involved the whole village for common decision on land management, infrastructures, and so on. But then, a strong team is required to conduct the follow-up work!

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• Focussed groups in Ethiopia

Group work is central to any community based research and planning. This example comes from a Rapid Rural Appraisal exercise carried out in Wollo in Ethiopia by the Ethiopian Red Cross Society and the Ministry of Agriculture. The aim of the exercise was to explore ways of local level planning for natural resource management at the Peasant Association (PA) level. Using RRA techniques local extension workers and research staff can facilitate local planning by engaging farmers in the development process.

The particular focus of this RRA was the management of hillside closure areas. These are portions of land where agriculture and grazing is restricted in order to allow regeneration of natural vegetation; this may be assisted by tree planting programmes. In the past, blanket restrictions have been imposed and local people have not been centrally involved in the management of their hillside vegetation resources. There is an increasing realisation of the necessity to develop local management plans that allow the benefits of the closures to be received locally.

Different groups within the Peasant Association have different views as to the potential role of the hillside closures and the components necessary for local management. The RRA team explored this diversity of views in a series of focus group discussions with different sectors of the community. This note describes what was done and some of the problems associated with the application of this approach in community level planning.

Source: RRA Notes (1989), Issue 7, pp.15–23, IIED London

What was done

- A group discussion was held among the RRA team to list the possible interest groups within the PA. These included: PA leaders, Producer's Co-operative members, individual farmers, Women's groups, youth, old men, old women, closure guards, livestock owners/non-owners, those living near/far from the closures etc.

- Discussion groups were set up with each of the different interest groups. Between 3 and 15 locals and 3-4 team members attended. The meetings lasted between 1 and 3 hours. A short checklist of questions was produced by the RRA team, but the discussions were allowed to flow freely; often being led by members of the farmer group. Ranking games were used to focus discussion around preferences and attitudes to different options. The attitudes of the members of the group were recorded as notes; these included verbatim quotes that demonstrated particular local views.

- A comparison of attitudes and plans for management was made following the first series of discussions (see Table 1). This matrix compares the attitudes of four of the groups to hillside closures. This gave the team an idea of the full range of views and an idea of the social/political position of the different adherents.

- A general workshop meeting was held where representatives from each of the focus groups were invited. Since they had each been party to the previous discussions, the debate in the larger meeting (30+ people) was fluid and open; all groups felt able to contribute. This provided a good forum for a discussion of future plans and a consensus on what action should be taken next was reached.

Problems and biases

- Place for meetings - the decision of where the group meetings were held was made by PA officials; it was usually the central meeting place. The 'officialdom' of this may have introduced a bias into the discussions. It is therefore important to complement group discussions with individual interviews in other places (at peoples' homes, in fields, at the closures etc.).

- Contacts - the people invited to the group discussions tended to be the most accessible and often official position holders in committees etc. The representativeness of these individuals must also be cross-checked.

- Groups - the choice of groupings was made by the RRA team. They had a lot of local knowledge of the area, but incorporated their own perceptions in the choice. Only two of all the groups included women. Does the choice of groups represent effectively the socio-political reality of the village?

- Topic - the choice of a particular topic - hillside closures and woodland management - may restrict the open discussion of the issues that people think are really pressing. The topical focus should not be adhered to too strongly and the linkages with other components of the system need to be fully explored and peoples own priorities allowed to come out in the discussions.

- Groups and implementation - the involvement of different interest groups in planning certainly provides important insight for implementation (potential conflicts, identification of key actors etc). However the mechanism for continuing the participation of different groups through research and planning into implementation has not been fully addressed. If it is not, the institutions involved in the top-down development of the past will inevitably take control and the value of generating local involvement in the early stages lost.

A full write-up of the Wollo RRA (Participatory RRA in Wollo: Peasant Association planning for natural resource management) will soon be available from ERCS, Addis and IIED, London.

Source: RRA Notes (1989), Issue 7, pp.15–23, IIED London

Group	Issues raised	Plans for management
PA leaders	- shortage of land - definite benefits of closures	- thinning of bush and pruning to increase grass production - cut and carry - controlled grazing? - No new closures - PA level control
Site guards	- fear for lives - lenient on poaching - do job because of food-for work	- More guards - More PA support - Supervised cut and carry
Old men	- Rights of use not clear - Do not regard trees as belonging to them	- Increase use-grazing access, wood and bark collection - Split closures to 'belong' to different villages - Local management and control
Women	- Cannot get access for fuelwood, clay etc. - Extra labour in collection Wildlife pests	- Alternative home planting useless as trees will be taken - Open the areas for use

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• Some difficulties in training for interviewing

The core of our fieldwork in Nigeria consisted of a series of community, group and household interviews. This represents one aspect of triangulation. In addition, we had also envisaged a specialised function for each type of interview.

The community interview was meant to generate information about possible community development ideas (bearing in mind that nearly half of our course participants were community development officers). Similarly, the household interviews were meant to generate possible agricultural project ideas in particular, since most of the other course participants were agricultural officers. Finally, the focus group interviews were meant to generate information about villager's reactions to existing projects.

In practice, however, all three interviewing formats produced information across the board (relating to health, education and public works as well as to community development and agriculture). They also tended to produce information about perceived problems and needs in a very generalised way which made it difficult to come up with particular project ideas and/or made it impossible to judge adequately between very different types of possible project solutions. For example, the DAG trainers thought that the problems with existing facilities in health, education, agriculture and so on demonstrated that the model of development which they embodied was inappropriate to Nigerian circumstances. Many of the participants, on the other hand, believed it was more a question of improving these facilities and/or of 'enlightening' the people.

Unlike most practitioners of RRA, we decided to use semi-structured questionnaires instead of a checklist of issues. The reason for this was that the training team felt that the preparation of such questionnaires (one for each of the different types of interviews) would constitute a useful intellectually rigorous exercise for our participants, which would force them into thinking clearly about what it was they really wanted to know about.

This approach was prompted by my impression that existing project identification was based on very casual and occasional (and elitist) conversations with villagers (to the extent it was based on information from villagers at all).

Source: RRA Notes (1989), Issue 7, pp.15–23, IIED London

Unfortunately, although it was a successful classroom exercise, the questionnaires proved to be disappointing in the field, despite our training emphasis on probing through the use of the 'six helpers' and the use of open ended questions and blank sheets for taking notes.

The effect of such an approach was probably to impose a structure which inevitably reflected our participant's perception of the world, whereas a checklist approach would probably have allowed more of the villager's perception of the world to emerge. In methodological terms, it allowed less room for learning during the fieldwork itself because it provided less flexibility to follow up spontaneous new leads, as and when they emerged.

As far as the methodology of the interview formats themselves were concerned, the participants were all given protocols on household, group and community interviewing. However, we did not attempt to judge their performances in the field against these protocols and cannot therefore say how much they learnt and applied from these, nor how their interviewing techniques different from their previous performance.

It did seem to be however that course participants were most at home with the community interview. There were also some interesting variations which arose spontaneously. My own team, for example, decided to allocate responsibility for each sectoral section of their questionnaire to a different team member, while I allocated the remaining team members to observation duties. This set up worked very well at our community meeting, at which about 150 people (exclusively men and children) were present.

Another team, however, decided to conduct their community interview on foot while walking around the village. This suited the circumstances of their particular village where the homes were very scattered. None of our teams overcame the well know problem of dominance by the village head and other prominent villagers, nor did any of them really adopt any of the measures suggested in the literature which were included in their protocols. Similarly, none of the village teams applied the protocols in relation to group interviews. In addition, many of the participants seemed to be unclear about the nature and purpose of group interviews.

As far as the household interviews were concerned, finally, less can be said with confidence since the trainers were not present. However, going by the reports presented and the discussions we had, it seems likely that these interviews were (like the others) characterised by a lack of probing. The lack of attention to detail was striking, as was the uncritical acceptance of the answers given. Equally, course participants also seemed to equate project intentions with the likely future realisation of such projects, a belief which is not borne out by past performance of village projects in Nigeria.

The overall conclusion, therefore, has to be that interviewing skills cannot be taken for granted and that communicating such skills is a difficult and time consuming business which requires more attention and practice than we were able to give during our course.

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Source: RRA Notes (1989), Issue 7, pp.15–23, IIED London