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RRA and the analysis of difference

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• Introduction

There is a deeply ingrained implicit assumption amongst many development workers that rural communities are fairly homogeneous groups of people, who have similar outlooks, problems and needs. It is also assumed that female-headed households and people with disabilities are even poorer and more vulnerable than others and are in need of special help.

Neither of these statements is necessarily true¹. Rural communities are rarely homogeneous and the poorest do not always have the same characteristics. RRA methods can help us to recognise these fallacies.

Over the last year I have used RRA techniques in health-related research and have conducted RRA training courses in Western and Southern Africa and in Bangladesh. Whilst the technical exercises involved in this work were similar to those widely used by RRA practitioners elsewhere, I have aimed to use RRA as a method for identifying, exploring and analysing intra-communal difference; and as a means of training development workers to appreciate the importance of this to their work. I have done this by training around 15 workers together in one village at a time. They have been divided up, so that the women

¹ Those communities which do indeed have the most socio-economic homogeneity seem to be of displaced people who are in great stress. They have been separated from their lands and traditional access to other resources and are mostly facing the same predicament. For the most part they do not then function as a 'community' per se, but rather as a group of individuals. This article concentrates instead on traditional indigenous settled rural populations.

fieldworkers have worked exclusively with village women², the older male workers have worked exclusively with old village men and the younger male workers with young village men. All have conducted parallel exercises and enquiries and have produced similar - but contrasting - sets of results. But what is the relevance of this to development?

• The setting

Most rural communities are made up of people connected through kinship, patron-client and other close social, economic and political ties. Within each community there are biological differences of age and sex; and these are combined with and contribute to socially defined, economic and political divisions of status, ethnic background, caste or wealth. Most communities have traditionally attributed higher status to elders and to men: older people are 'naturally' wiser because they have been alive for longer... men are 'naturally' more authoritative than women because they are stronger... wealthier people are 'naturally' superior to poorer people because that is their place in the world and they command more resources... mothers are 'naturally' superior to infertile women, because they have borne children... and so traditional authority structures were defined. 'Natural' differences were - and often still are - inextricably connected with social differences and traditional community authority structures were socially constructed around the axes of age, gender and access to material resources.

² Ideally, separate groups should have worked with older women and younger women - and children - but there have never been enough fieldworkers or time for this.

Just as traditional western values have recently seen great changes, so rural communities in the developing world are also in a state of flux. Old men complain that their sons no longer hold their traditional values and run after money; marital breakdown and lack of financial support for child care are becoming commonplace and the gap between rich and poor is on the increase everywhere. There has always been tension between old and young, men and women in societies. But nowadays that tension is often far greater than it ever used to be. There is never a single root cause to all problems, but much the most major one is economic pressure. As economic pressures increase, as rural communities become ever more permanently linked to the outside world and as access to health, education and other services become matters of economic wherewithal, traditional community support structures start to break down with the strain. Increasing numbers of people fall through the community safety nets.

Many development agencies are concerned about the extent to which their assistance really reaches the most vulnerable groups. Two tasks facing them are to identify which people are falling through the safety nets and then to work out if and how they can develop programmes which can effectively and sustainably ensure an improvement in their well-being. Until the complexities of intra-communal life are recognised, there will be scant chance of success with either of these two tasks. RRA techniques, however, allow us to study intra-communal difference effectively, and I draw upon various applications in Sierra Leone, Ghana, Malawi and Bangladesh³.

• **The problem**

- Whose problems? When development workers call a village meeting, those who attend are normally the male elders, who

³ The material from Sierra Leone is reproduced with kind permission of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine from whom the research was conducted. The material from Ghana, Malawi and Bangladesh are reproduced with kind permission of ActionAid, for whom the author conducted RRA Training courses.

are the traditionally respected village leaders and representatives. Their opinions of the village's needs are asked and the community is then considered to have been consulted.

- Who decides? When development workers plan a new school or a new health clinic, the advice of the elders whom they first met is sought and their decision is heeded.
- Who gets left out? RRA course participants in Malawi, after carrying out field work were clearly able to state from their own experience that:
 - on the whole, the richest people do not attend meetings, or show us around, because they have little to gain from us and have their own means of access to resources;
 - the poorest people do not attend meetings or show us around because they think we are not relevant to their lives and they consider themselves inferior; and,
 - people who do speak in meetings and show us around are those who have more respect and self-confidence. They present their own outlooks, problems and needs. They come from above-average socio-economic groups of the community and do not represent the needs of the poorest.

These issues are important because we may assume that we are responding effectively to the needs of all the villagers. Usually we do not.

• **Some analysis**

The following case-study material from RRA exercises is presented to highlight four particular axes of difference in communities: age, gender, ethnic background and poverty. These are never clear-cut: in some communities one axis is more important than another. Yet it is helpful to identify each axis individually, to acknowledge its existence before returning to the whole picture.

The relevance of age

In a preliminary meeting at the beginning of some RRA work in a village in Sierra Leone, village elders, young men and women were all asked to come together to hear about the proposed exercise. They were asked what matters concerned them about their village and some old men began to reply. As they spoke, the young men suddenly got up and walked off, complaining as they went. On being asked what was the matter, they replied: these old men never represent us or our needs - they only talk about themselves and forget about us. What's the point in our staying? We then encouraged the young men to stay, promising them that we planned to spend some time specifically with them, in order to learn about their views. They agreed to stay and the meeting resumed.

The old men in that village were talking about a new bridge to get across the river to the satellite villages where their agricultural land is, and a new mosque; the young men wanted a school and football goal posts: a classic battle between the old times and the modern.

How do the development workers decide who to help? Not by ignoring their differences. The dispute which took place was an important part of our information gathering exercise for that village. Subsequent exchanges during the map drawing exercise and other activities underlined the tension between old ways and young in this and other villages around. In my view it is no coincidence that the greatest tension was apparent in the poorest village. Development workers need to learn to be receptive to these arguments. RRA, which encourages communities to speak out and show us their village, provides us with an excellent opportunity to perceive this accelerated breakdown in community coherence.

The relevance of gender

The two mental maps shown in Figure 1 are of one village, again in Sierra Leone. One is drawn by the men, the other by the women. When compared, various differences of perspective can be noticed. Men's maps, like the one below, often tend to reflect their

contact with the outside world, their public and political roles in life, whereas women's maps reflect their domestic, more private activity sphere within the community. Men's maps tend to include all the roads which lead elsewhere from their village, while women's maps concentrate more on the village centre. Men tend to identify boundaries and objects of status, such as the cotton trees (reflecting the two separate clans which make up the village - it was from this map that we learnt of this), the (broken) chairman's tractor, the village drum and so on. Women did not show any of these. When asked to mark changes which they would like to see, men marked a series of buildings, lining the route of the main road leading into the village. The buildings would look very smart, prestigious signposts to their settlement. The nearest building to the centre was an administration hall. By contrast, the women, when asked to mark changes, first explained that this was not their role: "Women do not have any power to decide where any of these things should be. The men have the last say"; but when they were encouraged to pretend, they resolutely drew a huge hospital, close to the centre and of comparable size, followed by a school and wells to serve them.

In this part of the world, women take their children to clinics, if there is one nearby; and women would be the ones responsible for their children's school fees, if they were sent at all. Yet rare is the development project which asks the opinions of those who are most likely to use such services where they would like them to be situated. In another village, much poorer than this one, when women were asked to draw changes on their map, they replied: "We can't draw changes on this map, because the kind of changes we need can't be drawn". They had been telling me about overwork, breakdown in co-wife support and beatings from their husbands. How could drawings on a map help them?

The three maps in Figure 2, from Bangladesh, lucidly illustrate both generational and gender differences. The informants live as squatters on a government embankment beside a great river which is constantly eroding its sides. Their traditional lands lie below the water and they are now landless. The young men have to resort to migrant labour for many months of the year.

The old men's map charts precisely the land which they consider still belongs to them beneath the wide flowing river. They live in hope that some day the river will change its course once more and they will be able to reclaim it. (Some sections of the government think otherwise.) The young men have shown carefully the tracks surrounding their settlement and have marked also the road and railway which link them to potential work in the outside world. Finally the women who barely move off the embankment have studiously plotted the individual houses and land use within the settlement.

There are no rights and wrongs about these maps: although development workers initially find it hard to agree, they soon appreciate that there is no 'best map'. Instead they come to realise that different perceptions do exist and that each is important in its own way in helping us to understand how the village functions.

Seasonal calendars are another useful way of developing different perspectives of gender roles in communities (Figure 3). Women, for instance, are often much better at identifying individual disease patterns and normally include childhood illnesses as a matter of course in their health calendars (men, as a rule, don't). Women and men can both be asked to list their specific tasks in different seasons. Women's home maintenance work does not necessarily ease up after harvest, which is when men often have more time for discussions with development workers. (Other times should then be identified to work with women.) Men are sometimes - but not always - more useful informants on sources of, or fluctuations in, off-farm income and credit.

The answer to 'who is the best informant' is rarely straightforward. Again these variations in information help the development workers to understand that they should listen to a variety of opinions: that different members of the community have different information for us, depending on their experience. It is our job to learn from them and make use of the variety of views in our work.

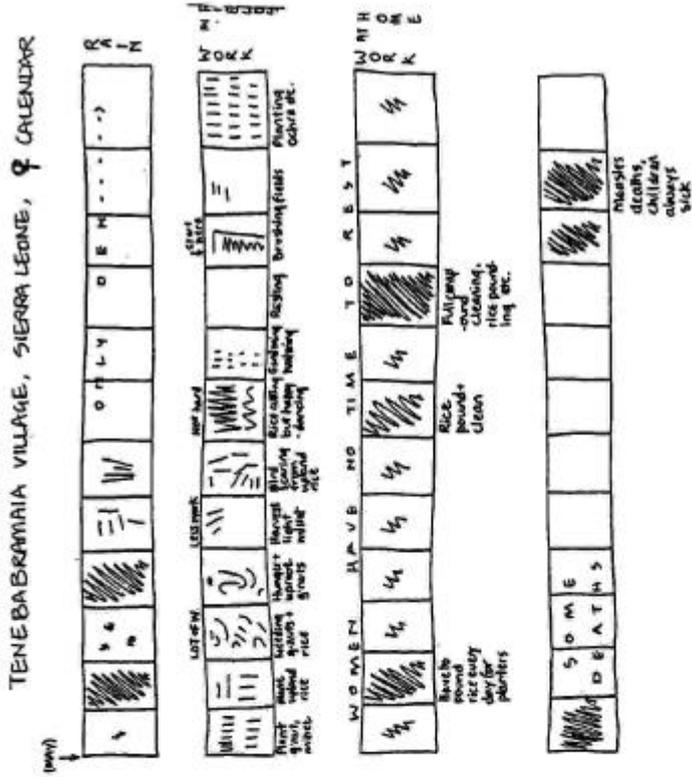
In some case, differences of opinion in the information we collect are particularly marked. Only to listen to one view would guarantee that a project based on it would fail. In

Malawi, for example, the women of one village did not express much interest in family planning. Some said that they would like to have a three year break between children; but others said their husband would not like them to use contraceptives and the majority said they did not mind having more children. The young men of the village said that they did not recognise a need for family planning on the basis of population, since the population of the area, as they believe, has decreased since former times and people have moved elsewhere. Nonetheless, they said they were interested in child spacing, but that it was the women who were not interested. The fieldworkers doubted the entire truth of this statement.

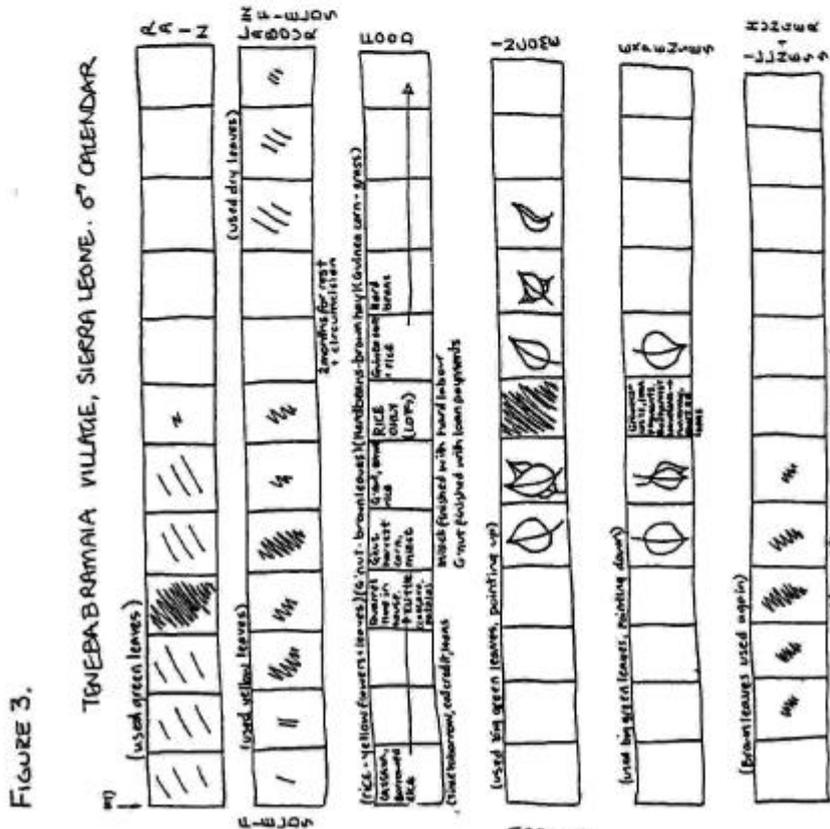
The old men, by contrast, perceive a real increase in population and land shortage and consider that family planning is urgently needed to help control the problem. However they say that women want to have more children and refuse to take family planning. They say that women compete with one another for children. Traditionally, if a man had more children than available land, he could ask the traditional chief to give him more land to divide amongst his sons. It would follow that a woman would be glad to have more children, because more land would then be farmed by them. Nowadays new land is no longer available and so this logic no longer applies. But, from what they said in this village, women there still appear to follow the traditional values of favouring more children. (N.B. This is in marked contrast to elsewhere in Malawi or the continent⁴).

⁴ For more details on the importance of recognising differences in attitudes of men and women in respect to family planning, see Welbourn 1991 in GADU Newspank 13, from OXFAM.

Figure 3

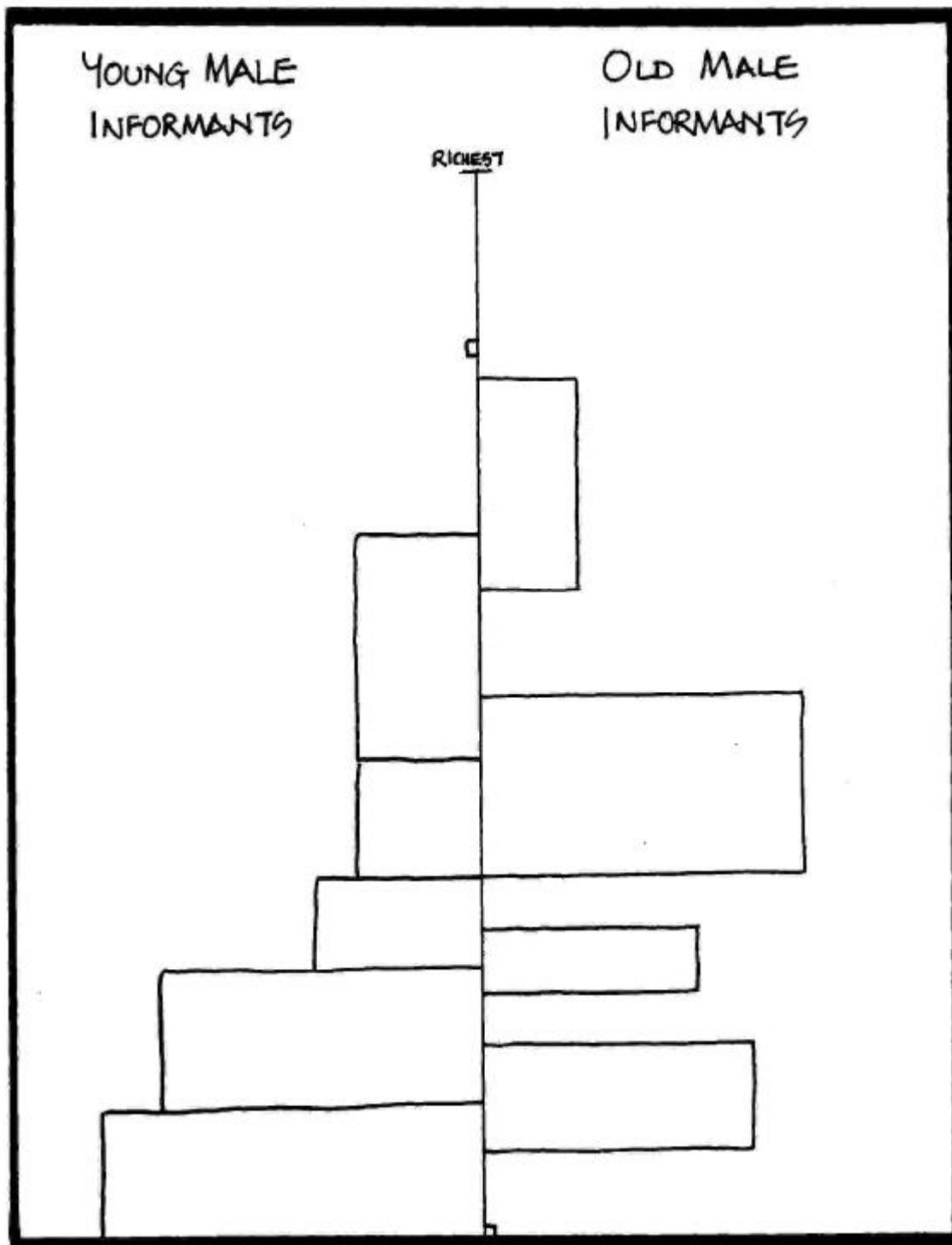


Heavy work brings the sickness. All other months we are sometimes sick. Children are sick at the same time.



Other issues: Rains come. OK in dry but u hard in rains. Buy extra food.
 Circumcision: Expensive but always in dry.
 100 Times: If in rain, very difficult.

Figure 4 Socio-economic dimension ranking, ActionAid, Ghana, Banku. December 1990



This example explains all too well the necessity of understanding everyone's perspectives on an issue in order to determine how best to tackle it. It also shows how important is the inter-disciplinary approach, which RRA offers us, to designing an effective solution. Provision of family planning services alone is not the answer.

The relevance of ethnic background

In some communities, perspective can be greatly influenced by ethnic background. A common difference of opinion in Africa is between pastoralists and agriculturalists: pastoralists look down on agriculturalists, who in turn value their sedentary lifestyle. Their attitudes to many things are governed by their ethnic background.

An interesting example of different perspectives was seen during an RRA exercise in Ghana, where socio-economic dimension (SED) ranking exercises were performed with old men, young men and women respectively. These ranking exercises are basically wealth ranking, a la Grandin, with a different name. The term 'wealth ranking' can suggest that it is only wealth that can bring status, so we chose to adopt the more cumbersome, but more accurate term (SED ranking, for short) instead.

In the village where the ranking exercise was conducted, there live five different ethnic groups. Preliminary comparison of the old male informants' rankings with those of the young men produced some interesting results. Whilst the young male informants' views of their community produced a reasonably standard Lorentz⁵ curve shape (see Figure 4) the old men's views produced an apparently nonsensical shape (unfortunately the women's ranking is yet to be completed). The fieldworkers' conclusions from this comparison were that each old man interviewed had his own ideas about status and well-being based on his own ethnically based perceptions of what constitutes this (e.g. a large herd compared with a lot of land). By contrast, the young men produced much more

uniform results. This was thought to reflect the extent to which modern economic interests of all the young men, regardless of ethnic background, are far more geared towards dry season river bank vegetable production and no longer towards the diverse economic practices of their elders. This was merely a hypothesis of the fieldworkers: but it makes sense. Values are changing and once again, fieldworkers need to be aware of that. The unusual profile created by the old men's ranking highlighted the important differences in their value systems⁶.

The relevance of poverty

The fourth axis of difference discussed here is poverty. Socio-economic dimension ranking is a powerful tool for the analysis of poverty: of who the poor are, of how their needs differ from those of others, and thirdly of their hidden nature. In Malawi, for instance, fieldworkers demonstrated to themselves:

- that whilst old men ranked female-headed households as the poorest, women and young men ranked the old, handicapped and childless as the poorest (Table 1);
- that the problems and priorities identified by village members were in some cases totally irrelevant to the needs of the poorest members of the community: for instance provision of school building roofs and teachers' housing, whilst a widely expressed need by old men, young men and women alike, would have no impact whatever on the needs of the poorest, who have no resources to send their children to school anyway, or who in many cases are the old and handicapped; and,

⁶ I am not trying to say that ranking does not work: it does: we just need to be aware of what it may be telling us. See Alsop 1989, RRA Notes 4, for an example of the successful informant-based ranking of a village dominated by the caste system. As she suggested, in cases where cultural or caste-based differences are likely to influence results: "If a cautionary note is to be sounded it is not to use those household attributes identified by informants, in their definitions of wealth, as discrete indicators of wealth. In this instance perceptions of wealth took in to account variables other than those discussed by informants in their definition of wealth" (1989, p12).

⁵ See Hope, Timmel and Hodzi 1984: Training for Transformation Mambo Press, Harare, p.9.37.

- that the highest sections of the community are more known to other villagers than are the poorest. There was much more common agreement on who the most important people of the village were than there was on the poorest.

attending also to the needs of the poorest, could make an agency inadvertently responsible for making the poorest even poorer and more hidden. As those better off have their needs attended to, they would be even less likely to voice the needs of the poorest.

It became clear to the fieldworkers from these observations that providing assistance without

Table 1. Pemba village rankings, Malawi - March 1991

Young men's groupings	Women's groupings	Old men's groupings
<p>1. Grow burly have money in the bank, food available throughout the year, offer ganyu to others for money, clothes and food; have reasonable cattle, goats, poultry and more children.</p> <p>2. Grow NDDF tobacco plus illegal burley tobacco, get more money in May than only maize grower, maize is fertilized, hence enough to eat. They are club members, but do not profit from the credit they receive.</p> <p>3. Mostly very old people supported by children for clothes, food and money, keep poultry produce little food, club members but do not receive profit from the credit they receive.</p> <p>4. Mostly very old people who don't have children to support them, they are not club members and do not use fertilizer, have no food throughout the year, have no source of income, have very poor houses, they don't have any chickens and some are disabled.</p>	<p>1. They grow burley tobacco. Have farm carts. Have cattle. Houses have corrugated iron sheets. Enough maize for the whole year. People do ganyu labour in their fields.</p> <p>2. Some grow burley tobacco. Food not a problem.</p> <p>3. Mostly middle aged. Enough land but gardens are eroded so they don't harvest enough to eat for the whole year.</p> <p>4. Those who are middle aged are just lazy. They fail to work to help their families. They do ganyu most times.</p> <p>5. They are old. No clothes. Female headed with children and divorced. Do not have enough food for themselves and their families. Don't have fertilizer to put in their gardens.</p> <p>6. Very old and handicapped. No food, no clothes and unable to do any work.</p>	<p>1. They have tobacco, big gardens. They grow burley tobacco. They employ some people to work in their gardens. They have cattle.</p> <p>2. They have big gardens. They grow NDDF tobacco. Most of them employ people to work on gardens.</p> <p>3. They don't employ people but work on gardens themselves. Most of them have enough food for the whole year.</p> <p>4. Most of them have enough food for the whole year. They do ganyu on rich the people's gardens. They make use of their small resources (land) which they have.</p> <p>5. Most of them are single but with children. They rely on ganyu for most of their food.</p>

Those attending

Group meeting: 2 3 4

Those who spoke: 2 3

2 3 4 5

2 3 4

1 2 3 4 5

2

• Making choices and changing attitudes

The above case-study material has highlighted a number of examples of the use of RRA to explore, identify and analyse intra-communal difference. However, some may feel that there would appear to be so much difference within a community that the task of unravelling it becomes an end in itself. In the Ghanaian community, for instance, there are 5 different ethnic groups, 2 sexes, old and young, rich, average and poor (at least)... these differences already produce at least 60 different sub-groups within this community. It would clearly be nonsensical to try to delineate the different interests of so many sub-groups.

Instead the important thing is to recognise that different interests exist and, by using RRA techniques, we can quickly identify which axes are of more relevance to issues concerning community development in which communities. In Sierra Leone and Ghana, for instance, gender and age differences seemed to generate quite a lot of tension in the communities; in Malawi, and Bangladesh these differences appeared to generate less tension compared to the commonly felt urgency of food security and landlessness. All communities possess dimensions of difference based on age, gender and poverty. But it is important for us as development workers to understand how these matters affect community cohesion - and their ability to help themselves - if we want to develop sustainable projects.

The recognition of such intra-communal differences as those discussed here has important implications for effective programme development. Some may consider that it is beyond their capacity to work with the most vulnerable, since they are often more in need of welfare than able to work together with agencies to improve their lives. This paper is not trying to suggest that the most vulnerable have to be worked with: that is for each agency to decide. But it is important for agencies to be aware of the choices which they are making by default, through not taking intra-communal difference into account. Agencies should at least be aware of whether

projects are in fact increasing the gap between the poor and the better-off.

Finally, I consider this use of RRA to explore and analyse intra-communal difference as a powerful training tool for fieldworkers. At the start of a new training course, fieldworkers often say 'everybody in this area is poor'; or 'women in this country can say whatever they want to and are not oppressed'; or 'the old men don't really know anything round here: the ones with the good ideas are the young men.' By the end of the training courses, having worked separately with young men, with women and with old men, the fieldworkers have come themselves to realise that:

- each individual group has its own story to recount;
- often these stories are partly conflicting; and,
- each is of equal importance in helping us to fill in the jigsaw of our understanding.

If we are to take community participation seriously the study of intra-communal difference should be a central part of our investigations. In real life, the sum of the parts is always greater than the whole.

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