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Finding the poorest in a Tamil Nadu village: a sequence of mapping and wealth ranking

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• Introduction

Tamil Nadu Agricultural University is collaborating with the Ford Foundation in exploring the applicability of recent advances in farmer participatory research and extension methods to rainfed conditions in Tamil Nadu. A recent review found that the university had been able to make a significant contribution to agricultural development in the better endowed irrigated lands, but had less success in the diverse and risk-prone drylands. Accordingly, a participatory on-farm programme with a farming systems perspective was recommended as a means to trigger both larger institutional as well as personal changes. Two workshops on PRA were held in December 1991 to orient senior agricultural researchers from throughout the TNAU system. The first was held at Aruppukottai Regional Research Station near Madurai, the second at Paiyur Regional Research Station near Bangalore. Full reports on both these workshops will be jointly published by TNAU and IIED during the course of this year (edited by R. Vijayraghavan, A. Paliniswamy, Jules Pretty and K.C. John).

This short piece reports on exercises conducted over two days in Kalkaruchi village near Aruppukottai. It describes a sequence of participatory social and resource mapping exercises combined with wealth ranking that enabled us to discover the poorest people in the village.

The main lessons for us were that PRA methods reveal hidden complexity and can bring the poorest to the attention of

investigators. But it is the attitudes and practice of the team that are critical. These methods revealed an apparent complete picture of wealth groups in the Harijan community, but it was only with persistent triangulation and probing that we found our original picture to be inaccurate. Good use of the PRA methods is not necessarily guaranteed by the methods alone.

Social mapping and other participatory methods

We arrived at the village to find a bustling small urban centre. At first the team were nervous and walked through the lanes without interacting. By the end of the afternoon, the group was relaxed and laughing with other groups of local people. One sub-group started a social map with a group of women by asking one to draw a map of the village, so “we can know about your place”. They used different rangoli powders¹ to indicate roads, canals, temples, cinema, shops, health centre, cooperative society, industry and housing. The group was joined by the rest of the team as they concluded interviews elsewhere. The numbers of local people involved also grew, and several people holding sticks made a series of sequential changes. The Harijan colony only appeared towards the end of the exercise and even then they were reluctant to add detail of paths and approach roads (Figure 1). Individual houses were not marked as there were 1500 altogether. One old man said “if we start marking all the houses, it will be dark by the time we finish”. When the map was

¹ Coloured powders, locally used during festivals to make decorative pictures on the floor.

concluded, the team divided into separate sub-groups, one interviewing about the map, another producing seasonal calendars with a group of men, another with a group of women, another various pie diagrams. The methods and interviews flowed naturally and with great ease. At the end the teams set off on two transect walks, accompanied by groups of local people.

Transects and seasonal calendars

The team began the day with a review meeting from 0800 until 0945. This focused on what we had learnt the previous day, gaps, and methods proposed for today. We arrived at the village by 1020, and split into two sub-groups to proceed on transect walks. A range of interviews focused on livestock rearing, dryland farming, children and nutrition and labour patterns. During an interview with two farmers met while walking between fodder sorghum fields, one of the team members began marking the months of the year on the ground with a stalk. He then broke some stalks and laid them out to represent monthly labour demand as the two men commented on labour. Another team member then squatted down to comment and point. One farmer then started to point at and comment on the diagram. Another man arrived along the path. All then squatted down together - 3 interviewers and 3 farmers. Attention was now firmly focused on the calendar, and a series of sequential changes were made. Some of the sticks were lengthened, some shortened. The process was repeated twice, month by month.

Social mapping and wealth ranking in the Harijan community

Following further interviews and lunch, we decided to walk to the Harijan colony on the far eastern side of the urban area. This was *Bharathi Nagar*, the community missed off the previous day's social map until near the end of the 'anything else?' prompting. We arrived in the colony and stopped by a lime kiln, near a large shady *Prosopis* tree. We already had a plan to produce a map, so the place near the path and by some irrigated vegetable fields was ideal. Getting started is always difficult.

The process began with a group of only two young men. We asked them to mark their community, and one took the stick and started to draw in the sand under the tree. First the approach roads were drawn, then the lime kiln and tree, the temple, the fields, wells, trees, houses and drainage channel. As the men were drawing in the sand, the group grew to about 20 adults and numerous children in 10 minutes. The women took over with the rangoli powders, and the older men stayed on the fringes of the group. The women used pink for roads, blue for active wells, orange for dry ones and the temple, green for the fields, and yellow for the kiln. In the second phase, the men started to point and suggest changes. Tree leaves were added to show major tree species. Slowly those on the outside were drawn into the map making process, which was about 3x4 metres. An increasing number of people had rangoli powder on their hands. We asked them all to put a stone for each house, and everyone was very interested in putting their own house. The map became a focus for discussion about farming and farming techniques.

The numbers of people actively involved began to decline as the map making was drawing to a conclusion. At this point the team divided into 4 sub-groups, one leaving with some women and children for venn diagramming of institutions, the others for interviewing various parts of the map with 2 or 3 people each. We then asked 3 young boys to add all the remaining houses, with the aim of moving towards a wealth ranking. Once all the stones were present, we asked them to put the houses into different wealth classes by marking them with different coloured powders. They began with yellow for the wealthy, as 'yellow is flourishing'. These households had a TV or radio, owned 2-3 acres of land, and had a relative working outside in a government post. Annual income was said to be of the order of Rs 2500. The second class was marked in pink - they had 1-2 acres, bullock carts and cattle, and an income of Rs 1500. The last group were green - the landless labourers earning less than Rs 1000 annually. There were 7 yellow, 10 pink and 29 green.

This then struck us as curious, as we had heard there were more than 60 households in the village. Perhaps there were more than one per house? Or had some been missed off? We probed the large group of women and men who were by now involved, and after some discussion discovered that the missing were “only huts, we didn't count those, they are the downtrodden who depend on daily labour”. The group then added a further 16 stones, and gave them an orange colour (the triangles in Figure 2).

Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

These were the class below the poorest, in the poorest and most disadvantaged group of the village, the Harijans. We asked about the difference between the ‘greens’ and the ‘oranges’. In fact the ‘greens’ had small plots of less than 0.5 acre, and it was the ‘oranges’ who were completely landless. Many of these had been better off with some livestock, but in the past 10 years several bouts of disease had devastated herds and threatened whole livelihoods. The whole process, beginning the previous day with the first social map, showed how easy it is to miss the poorest.

This mapping and wealth ranking then led us to focus interviews on both on-farm and off-farm livelihoods, including visits to the match factory employing children and the weaving community. It was clear that a strategy for participatory agricultural research would have to take account of significant and rapid economic change as well as the different needs and perspectives of farmers and landless in the different wealth and caste groups.

Finding the poorest had not been easy, but the most important lessons we learned related to using sequences of methods to find the poorest and ensuring we do not give up too early.

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