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Cultural sensitivities on the Rapid Appraisal team

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As part of rapid appraisal training for a Forest User Group study in Nepal, certain personal, cultural, and communications factors emerged which the team members felt we must discuss. It turns out that our group is very sensitive (that's good) to Nepali cultural nuances and to the way in which we insiders and outsiders present ourselves so as to cause minimum impact in remote villages. We have discussed how we should dress (both the woman and the men) - modestly, conservatively. We have also discussed the use of certain hand signals which, in Western society, might conveniently signal transitions during the interviewing process (e.g. when to tighten up the discussion, close the group, and pass the ball - in Khon Kaen RRA terms). Some hand signals in the Nepali context sometimes have vulgar connotations: a thumb up, two fingers up, or using thumb and forefinger to make a circle - an 'okay' signal in North America. It turns out that these are sexually suggestive in Nepal.

Certain other body language, such as particular forms of eye contact and eye signals which Euro-Americans commonly use can be interpreted differently than expected, sometimes offensively, and we have had to work out ways to avoid them. We Americans on the team pointed out to our Nepali teammates that holding one's arms across the chest, as Nepalis sometimes do, can be interpreted as offensive in the West (signalling disdain or boredom or a show of superiority), while in Nepal it is a polite and accepted posture with no apparent negative connotations. The members of our team are learning from one another even as we proceed in the field.

Sometimes issues arose of what to say and how to say it, and what to avoid saying in normal conversation. For example, we talked

long time about how to introduce ourselves personally and how to state our study objectives in simple terms, especially in the villages. (This issue is not quite as critical when working with more educated, cosmopolitan project officers). We had thought naively that we could simply tell villagers that we had come to discuss forest user groups with them and to 'ask' (*sodnu*) them 'questions' (*prashna*) about their forest. However, this approach can be taken as highly officious and after serious discussion, we changed it. We now tell them that we've come *sallah garnu*) or simply 'talk about' (*kura garnu*) the subject, and to seek 'information' (*jaankaari*). They are our teachers, we say, and we are the students and we want to learn from them. The 'ask you questions' mode suggests to villagers a kind of confrontation, as in a court of law or with an officious forest ranger who has perhaps come to find out which villagers have been cutting illegally in the forest. When Nepali villagers meet anyone in the forestry business they are understandably suspicious and we want to avoid instilling all such fears and suspicious.

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