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## Together get a grip on the future: an RRA in the Emmental of Switzerland

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### • Introduction

“Let’s do an RRA in Switzerland!”. The thought struck two extensionists in Switzerland, who had considerable experience in developing countries. It was time to try out something new in Swiss extension (*beratung*). A visit to LBL (*Landwirtschaftliche Beratungszentrale Lindalu*) by an Australian and a New Zealand agriculturalist familiar with RRA in ‘developed’ country settings acted as a further catalyst.

### • The project

#### The institutional context

LBL is mainly engaged in training extension workers, and in some research into socio-economic matters. As a service centre for all official extension services in the German- and Rumantish-speaking parts of Switzerland, it was the ideal place to take an initiative on RRA, which it did. A partnership was struck between LBL and the extension service of the Emmental region in Switzerland. The local extension service was involved from the start in developing the RRA, due to their being trusted by the local farming population, and due to their own interests in developing new methods.

#### The area

The Emmental is a rural area near the capital Berne. The terrain is hilly, often quite rough, with forests and isolated farms. A farm with more than 20 ha is considered large. The RRA took place in the Gohl valley, a tributary to the main Emmental valley. The whole catchment is roughly 15km<sup>2</sup>, with about 70 households.

### The team

The team consisted of 12 people of different backgrounds:

- 7 agriculturalists;
- 1 socio-economist;
- 2 foresters;
- 1 ethnologist; and,
- 1 home economics trainer.

Of these 7 were men and 4 women; 6 of the team worked with the local population. Five people were from the ‘outside’, all with extensive experience in developing countries. All team members except one understood the local dialect. This was Raymond Ison from the University of Sydney. Being an Australian with no knowledge of the local language, but with experience in RRA in a developed country environment, he was able to contribute an unbiased, ‘outsider’s’ view and insights into RRA methodology.

### • The process

*a.* First, a considerable input was needed to explain to Swiss extensionists what RRA is and aspires to achieve. This was done in a careful and non-threatening manner, resulting in: “yes, let’s try it out”.

*b.* A tour through the area by some of the outsiders, led by the local extensionist. Informal observation and discussion to get a feel of the area.

*c.* Planning workshop (1 day) with local extension workers, people from LBL and Raymond Ison - all members of the RRA team. The objectives became clear to

everybody, methodological questions were clarified and the preparations for the intensive week were organised.

*d.* Preparation (1 month) included:

- secondary data reviews;
- key informant interviews;
- finalise team composition;
- selection of households to be contacted for semi-structured interviews (SSI), based on information from key informants combined with other socio-economic information available; and,
- logistics.

From this, we compiled a 'reader' on the Gohl valley and inhabitants, as a reference for the team, made a list of households to be contacted and had a rough programme.

*e.* Intensive week with whole team

#### Monday (half day)

Getting acquainted - all team members; planning, introduction to SSI.

#### Tuesday

Transects across the valley in two groups. Evening: meeting some 'progressive' farmers who helped validate some of the first concepts and questions cropping up from the SSI's.

#### Wednesday & Thursday

SSI (2-4 hours each) in alternating teams of two visiting individual farming families on their farm. Of 70 households 29 were visited - they were contacted beforehand, and all agreed to discuss their farming system with 'outsiders'. Exchange of information and reshuffling of interviewing teams during midday-meals and evening (a la Sondeo). Write up of ideas arising on cards, for later team analysis.

#### Friday

Evaluating and collating the information on the cards into general 'themes' to be discussed with Gohl inhabitants in the evening. Visualisation on pinboards.

#### Evening

All persons contacted during the week plus anybody else living in the Gohl (e.g. local press) were invited to check on the results of the work of the RRA team. More than 60 people turned up from about 30 households. Participants were invited to discuss in small focus groups on the themes of their interest. A group member reported back in a plenary session on discussion and outcomes. Supper concluded the evening.

The suggestions and propositions generated in the individual SSI's were clarified and ranked by the local people interested in taking up the ideas. We used the pinboards and cards for this. Future action strategies were developed.

#### Saturday (half day)

Checking and photos of the pinboards of Friday evening. These photos were photocopied as the report on the RRA (a photoprotocol).

Reflection/Evaluation (2 hours) by the team:

- on the results, on the methods used;
- defusing any remaining group dynamic problems within the team; and,
- discussing what would we do differently next time, etc.

*f.* Follow-up

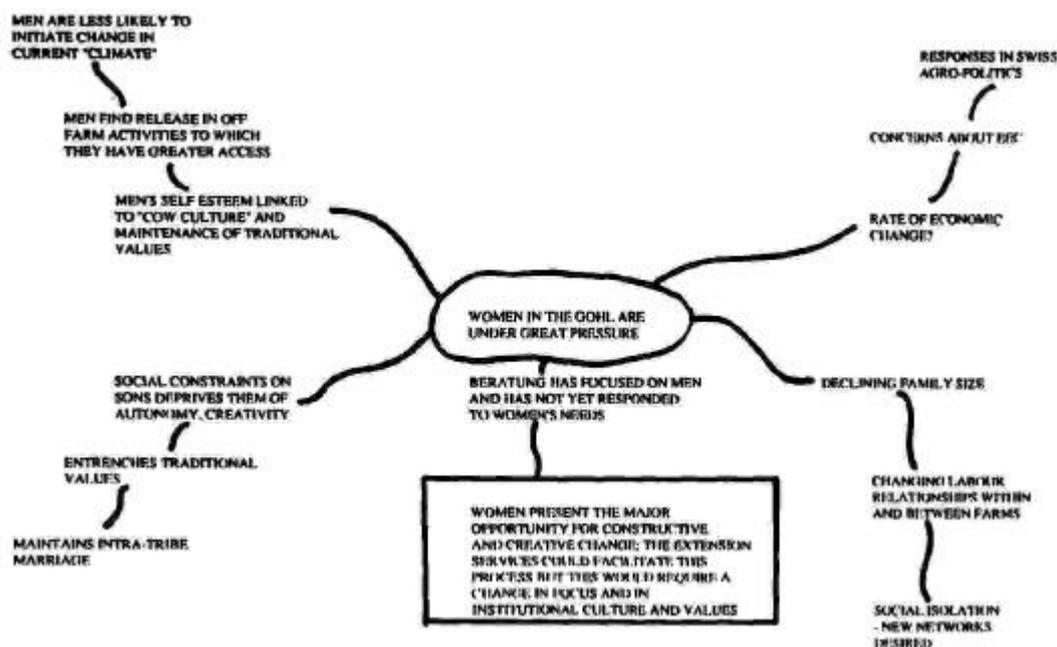
The ideas for action generated by the RRA were pursued by the farming families of Gohl valley and the local extension service (presently under way).

### • **Highlights of the RRA**

#### **Mind-mapping as a tool for formulating hypotheses**

Mind-mapping starts by writing a 'hunch' on some topic in the middle of a sheet of paper. Freely associated thoughts are added to the 'hunch', resulting in several 'lines of thought'. Finally a hypothesis on the 'hunch' is formulated, taking into account the various lines of thought. The mind-map (Figure 1) can lead to a hypothesis (the box in Fig. 1) which arises from this line of thinking.

**Figure 1. Mind-mapping based on the team's realisation that women in the Gohl Valley were under great pressure - leads to hypothesis (see box)**



This particular issue came from group insight and raised the questions of whose learning is important (local people, team members or both?) and how this learning might best be shared or used in action.

### **Mind-mapping for setting up a 'motivation system'**

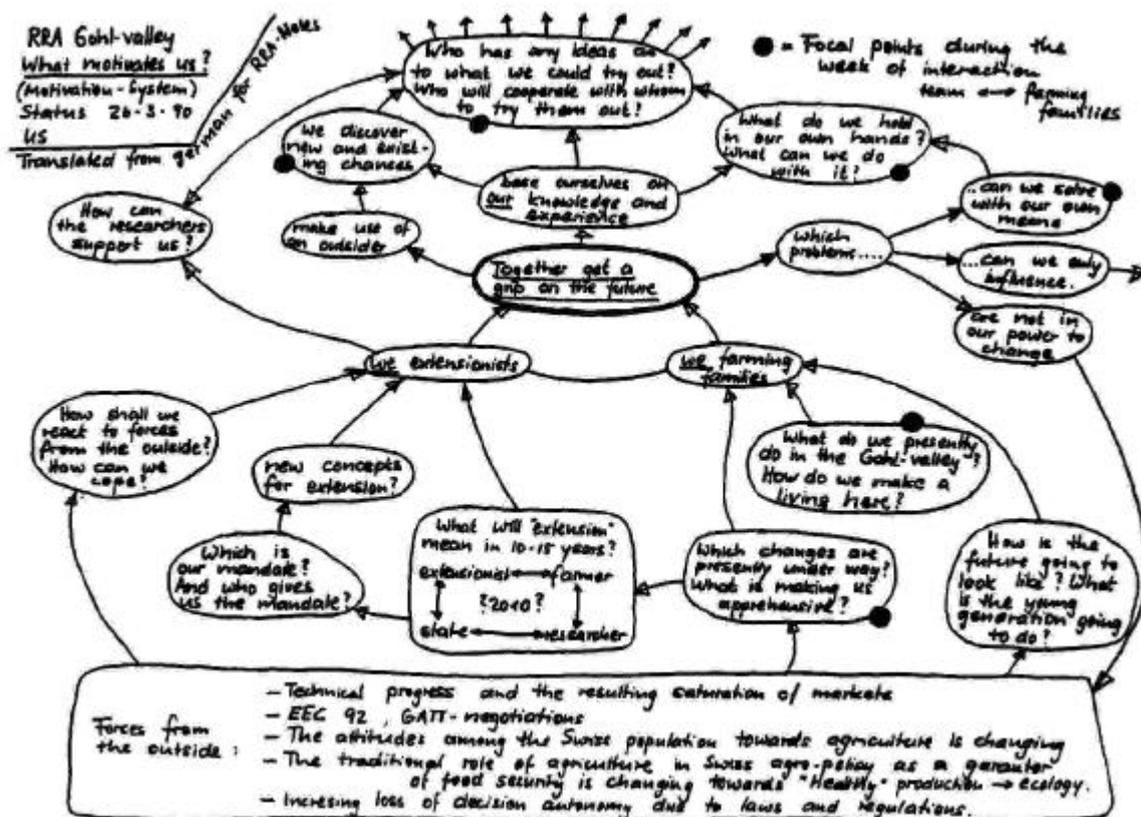
Mind-mapping also turned out to be very useful to reach a consensus on our team motivation for doing the RRA. A draft was presented by one member of the team, which was amended during the planning workshop (see Figure 2). Starting again from a central 'hunch' on what this RRA was all about, the reason why we wanted to do this led to a rough causal relationship. Doing something together, and clearly defining who we were, were two important issues. This resulted in a clear focus on interaction between farming families and team members - rather than farming families as analysed by outsiders. This also clarified those problems we could not do much about, and those which were in our power to change, on which we concentrated.

The figure (jokingly referred to as our 'motivation mandala') was used to recruit more team members, and in discussions with the people of the Gohl to explain why the RRA was taking place. It was also an important hand-out to local journalists!

### **Transects in opposing directions**

The team split into two groups. Both groups walked the same route, but in opposite directions. The route itself went down one side of the valley and up the other, and took about 3 hours. This traversing in opposite directions had some interesting effects. The groups saw different things and talked with different people (spontaneous way-side discussions) - but on the same path. Exchanging experiences during the transects gave us a broader perspective and exposed cultural and value judgements. The transects helped as a team-building exercise, and for 'outside' team members to understand the lay of the land.

Figure 2. Our "motivation mandala"



**Semi-structured interviews for identifying potentials**

Before setting out, interviewing skills were developed in two ways. The first evening a role-play of a 'typical' SSI was presented (using a local extensionist playing the role of farmer) and discussed. A group of 8 farmers assisted on the second evening in getting the team members to practice their conversation skills. These farmers were well known to extensionists for being open-minded and helpful. They gave valuable tips on what to ask, and above all how to ask without offending.

For the interviews we formulated a common, rough checklist. Each interview was structured along these lines:

- Starting with the history of the farm. The older generation talked about the old days, when "work was a lot harder, but we had much less stress".

- This led naturally to the changes taking place now, and their possible and probably repercussions on farming and the present way of life. Here the young entered the discussion.
- Finally, the discussion turned to ideas for the future. Good questions to encourage the positive thinking about the future were:
  - What new things did you try this year, and why did you try them? What do you expect out of them? Why?
  - What do you do when you are not thinking about earning money? Why?
  - What have you been thinking of doing for a long time now, but have never come around to doing? Why?
  - Consider having a full week off, what would you do? Why?
  - Which are your 'crazy' ideas? Why are they crazy?

One third to one half of the interview focused on this searching for ideas, which were also

ranked. This was because the local extensionists wanted a strong active impact to come out of the RRA - as opposed to a more systematic analysis of the status quo. It turned out that people did get excited about this. Straight after each interview the ideas and suggestions which cropped up, plus any major new insights gained, were written on cards and pinned to the wall in the team room.

### **Triangulation with secondary data: cross-checking key interviews with maps**

- Maps. In Switzerland cartography has a long and famous tradition. The oldest easily accessible map (1:25,000) of the Gohl valley is 100 years old. Since 1955 such maps have been updated regularly (every 5-8 years), the newest being from 1986. The maps are the same as used by the military (therefore highly accurate), and are available to the public at reasonable cost in most bookshops.

Maps of 1885, 1955, and 1986 were compared and analysed. This resulted in so-called 'difference maps', whereby changes in infrastructure and forest boundaries were drawn in by hand onto the 1955 map. The insights gained were partially expected: forest had advanced considerably in the last 100 years to the detriment of grazing land. Some insights were surprising: e.g. the number of farms which had disappeared from the landscape in the first half of this century, and the extent of road building in the last 30 years.

- Economic data on single farms. The local extension service has detailed data on about 15 farms in the Gohl valley. This is because the extension service has to ensure proper use of public funds for construction purposes on farms. Farms receiving government funds have to maintain proper bookkeeping. This bookkeeping data is computerised and easily accessible, provided the data remains anonymous. Bar diagrams etc. were made, various management strategies compared, and shared main issues highlighted (i.e. cost of mechanisation, importance of area of privately owned forest). This effectively eliminated the

need for detailed economic questions during the SSI's.

- Key informant interviews turned out to be a mixed blessing. The questions concentrated on identifying the various types of people living in the Gohl in order to cover as many types as possible. This generally worked well, but agricultural resource people tended to 'forget' people who didn't milk cows (cows obviously having a strong traditional prestige, which borders on the ritual). The information from the key interviews was crosschecked with the map to identify forgotten households. Difficult cases for extension also tended to be forgotten. Finally a matrix was set up with households linked to key criteria emerging from key interviews (i.e. future secure, future insecure, specialist, big, small, etc). From this matrix the 29 (of 70) households for SSI were chosen.

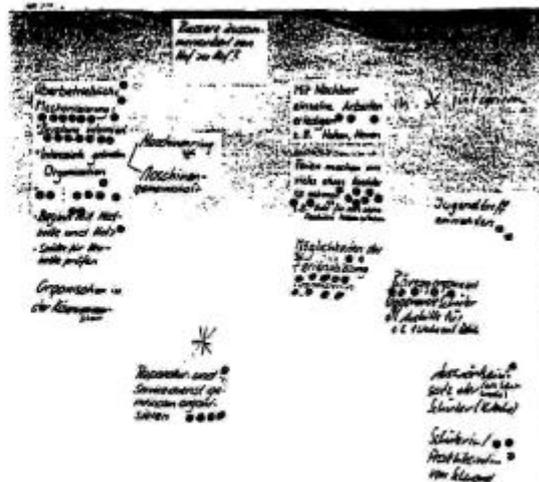
In retrospect, the combination of key interviews with accurate maps and with the telephone book (each farm has a phone - we checked with the map) was very useful to detect 'minorities' and 'eccentrics' within a community. Use the map to detect households that nobody mentions - and then ask "*Who are these people?*".

A lot of effort could have been saved if we had known from the beginning that the local post office had a detailed map with the daily routes of the postman marked in, with the houses where mail is delivered! Where seasonal migration from valley to Alps and back occurred, the postman would also be a prime source of information as to when people were where.

### **Visualisations: cards on pinboards**

Swiss extension has a history of the use of cards (different shapes, sizes and colours) to facilitate group work and provide a visual record of the group process (adapted from the German ZOPP system). Cards are pinned to paper-covered pinboards until agreement is reached about the content/process. Cards are then glued to the paper, photographed (usually late at night; 35 mm colour) and the paper removed to be placed on a wall, stored etc.

**Figure 3.** a) Friday group work on "living on a farm"  
 b) Using dots to indicate priorities on "better cooperation between households"



Photocopies of these photographs, photographs taken in the field (a freelance photographer accompanied the team) and appropriate text are then combined to produce a 'photoprotocol' for the activity. This allowed both content and process to be reported on in an accessible style.

Simple rules for writing cards: a) write BIG; b) no more than three lines per card; and, c) one idea per card (for easy rearrangement). Cards can be sorted into thematic bunches as in Figure 3. These sheets were used to focus for the Friday evening workshop; coloured dots (different colours for men and women and different priorities) were used by group members to rank priorities from the SSI's (see Figure 3b). The theme of 'better cooperation between households' was the most popular amongst local participants and was discussed by two groups in the evening. Within this theme both groups decided cooperation in mechanisation was the top priority, followed by the need to organise a system whereby farming families could take short vacations.

**The outsider effect to broaden the perspective**

The Australian team member, Raymond Ison, had very scant knowledge of Swiss agricultural conditions for production, nor of the official policies in place. He also did not understand the local idiom (all the other team members did). However, we saw this as an asset. Ray was given the explicit task of asking any question which came to his mind, no matter how 'silly' or 'provocative' they may have been to the local people or to the other team members. This outsider was actually regarded as a prerequisite for a successful RRA because of bringing a completely new perspective. He saw and heard things which the locals (including the Swiss team members) no longer perceived due to their culturally-fixed behaviour.

We assumed that:

- our outsider would look at an existing situation from an unconventional perspective;
- he would be able to convey his perception (all other team members understood English well!); and,

- he would be allowed to get away with saying and suggesting things which a local person would not dare say for fear of antagonising others or making themselves ridiculous.

It worked. Ray did perceive things in an 'outlandish' and unconventional way, and could also convey his perception. Most of his questions were easily answered because they were trivial for the local people. However, sometimes quite awkward head-scratching resulted within the team, because they realised that the usual answers couldn't stand up to persistent probing. For instance, it turned out that the usual off-the-cuff reason for the Swiss policy on agro-subsidies was not really convincing. This led to considerable soul-searching and analysis of the real reasons for the policy.

Ray could also say things the other team-members would not have dared to say i.e. the suggestion for policy-makers seriously to consider giving up farming in extreme locations and let 'the wild' take over was acceptable for an Australian. Had a Swiss said this, he might have been driven out of the valley. Farmers could also accept from an Australian that maybe they were a bit blind to alternatives to milking cows. Any Swiss person would have more problems raising this issue with farmers. It was not only farmers who were culturally blinkered. Ray was able to challenge conceptions amongst team members as to their definitions of 'good' and 'bad' farmers and also to help keep the importance of women (both as team members and in the Gohl community) on the agenda.

This experience suggests that one might use and develop the 'outsider-effect' for RRA's which are mainly run by locals (i.e. people from within the culture in which an RRA takes place). In our case, conventional thinking and reasoning was sufficiently rattled to require rethinking along more innovative lines. The conditions for the effect to take place seem to include:

- the outsider must have a solid professional background and experience in dealing with rural people;
- the outsider must be able to win the confidence of local team-members - and yet still be cheeky enough to be provocative;
- the outsider's role of asking provocative questions in a sincere way (which doesn't exclude a humorous approach!) must be accepted by all other team members, the other team-members must feel relaxed and appreciative of this role;
- at least half the team members must be sensitive enough (and capable linguistically) to spontaneously assist in crossing the communication gap; e.g. translate a spontaneous joke made by a farmer, which is often more a linguistic exercise - and often very revealing for an outsider!; and,
- at least some local team members must have the skill to absorb the toughest provocations by translating the content into a locally acceptable form.

At any rate LBL considers the increased costs of having an outsider in the team a justified expenditure, and has decided to include outsiders in any future possible RRA's in Switzerland. This also includes experienced professionals from developing countries.

### • Concluding comments

We would now define our activity as a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) but we are left with concerns about the degree of participation (by local farm families) and other methodological issues which include:

- how to achieve genuine interdisciplinarity;
- how did the 'outsider' experience his role;
- team versus local learning;
- team selection and institutional setting - it will be rare, in our experience, that issues of gender and institutional culture/value constraints do not emerge; and,
- the intensity (for team members) of the activity. Time pressures can bring forth creativity, and with due attention to process, can help resolve conflict.

Of course we have our own ideas on all these issues; they shall have to wait until other papers. The bottom line for all participants was that it was a stimulating, positive

experience with useful outcomes PRA has a role to play in 'developed' countries also!

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