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# Learning about wealth : an example from Zimbabwe

**Ian Scoones**

## • Introduction

Discovering the patterns of wealth distribution and investigating the dynamics of rural differentiation are notoriously difficult. Many social surveys have attempted this involving laborious longitudinal studies of household income and expenditure patterns. Rarely do such studies investigate rural inequality from the farmers' perspective. It is increasingly realised that, in order to gain insight relevant for development, a study must be geared towards understanding local patterns using the frameworks of understanding used by farmers themselves. The methods used by the extended social survey are expensive in time and person power for both data collection and analysis. Their highly structured format rarely enables the research to enter into the farmer's world.

The recognition of this has led to the current debate on appropriate methodologies for participatory farmer-based research. Rapid Rural Appraisal has become an umbrella heading for such approaches. RRA attempts to assist rapid learning about rural situations through the application of a range of semi- structured research techniques. One of the current limitations of RRA approaches is that it fails to deal effectively with the stratified nature of rural societies. Although RRA ensures many biases are avoided it is often unclear whether a representative range of socio-economic circumstances have been appraised.

## • Wealth ranking

Wealth ranking is a technique that can be used for gaining rapid insight from a local perspective into factors affecting differentiation. It combines in-depth discussion of wealth with a ranking exercise that allows the participating group of local people to assess the relative wealth of households in a preselected list. The technique has a number of potential applications:

- The stratification of a sample according to wealth criteria for further focused appraisals on particular sub-sectors of the population;
- The generation of questions for further research into rural differentiation; and,
- An examination of survey data from a farmer's perspective.

The technique has been developed by Polly Hill in Nigeria and Barbara Grandin in Kenya. A handbook for use by project fieldworkers is soon to be produced by ITDG[1]. This short note reports on the experience of using wealth ranking in the context of a study of household economics and livestock production in southern Zimbabwe.

## • Background

In this instance the aims were firstly to generate insight into the local conception of wealth and secondly, to provide a separate, farmer-based classification of the sample of households that the study was researching with.

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[1] Intermediate Technology Development Group, UK.

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A sample of 70 households had been set up a year before on the basis of two criteria that the research intended to investigate. One was an ecological stratification based on whether the household was positioned in one of two ecological zones: the sandy soil savannah in the hilly area or the clay soil savannah in the plains area. The other criterion was based on the ownership of cattle and the sharing relationships involved. Local farmers assisted in the selection of the original sample and, with the help of their local knowledge, a range of wealth categories was incorporated.

In order to investigate the implications of the research data collected and to generate further directed questions it was necessary to have a classification according to wealth. But what is wealth? What criteria should be chosen? These are questions that the research data could not answer. Most researchers arbitrarily choose some factor(s) and use them as the basis for analysing the data. In this case it was decided that the sample itself would make that choice.

- **Methods used**

The discussion of wealth was held at three separate meetings. It was decided that views of different sectors of the local population would be sought. In particular it was decided to investigate the contrasting attitudes of men and women. The meetings consisted of 2-3 hours of discussion followed by the ranking exercise. The discussion sessions were attended by about 10 people and the ranking exercise conducted jointly by 4 or 5. Between the group attending each workshop they knew all the households in the sample. One meeting was attended by men from the sample another by women. Participants were involved so as to give a range of ages, residence areas with respect to the ecological zones, apparent wealth and income sources (e.g. remittance income vs. farming) from knowledge of the homes concerned. The third meeting was conducted with the resident research and development team: all local people who had been working with the research in the area.

The discussion of wealth was essentially unstructured. It opened with us posing the simple question: 'what is wealth?' A few key themes had been decided upon in advance and the discussion was guided through each of these. These included comparison of the past with the contemporary situation and contrasting the clay and sandy soil savannah zones. Basically it was left to the group to explore and debate each of the topics as they arose. This they did with great enthusiasm and excitement. It was often a very heated discussion and always highly animated. Notes were taken on the content of the discussion, on general reactions and on quiet asides. Each meeting generated fascinating insight into the local attitudes to and interpretation of differentiation and inequality. Before the close of the discussion each group was asked to highlight particular factors that they viewed as important indicators of wealth in the light of the receding discussion.

- **The discussion: a summary of conclusions**

A summary of the historical, ecological and gender comparisons that emerged from the three workshops are presented in outline form below in order to give an impression of the type of issues discussed. The substantive results and detailed discussion of these will be reported elsewhere.

### Historical contrasts

Wealth in the past

- Many cattle, loaning sites, wives and children.
- Wealth dependant on inheritance: the older people were the richest.
- The poor survived through begging, pledging daughters or selling stock to the hurudza (rural agricultural entrepreneurs).

Wealth now

- Good farming; access to money; education; building a fine home.

- Wealth often through work in town - possible for the young to be wealth.
- The poor are not helped by others. The poor are now visible. They survive in drought because of help from Mugabe and Food for Work.

## Ecological contrasts

### Sandy soil savannah

- Wealth is due to the dambos (valley 'wetlands'). There is food self-sufficiency in drought; even the chance of sales/exchanges of grain.
- Accumulate (e.g. cattle) in drought through grain sales, especially to the clay plains area.
- Labour needed for agriculture high (manuring, guarding against baboons), so less work in town and less education.

### Clay soil savannah

- Wealth is from town; in the past cattle were important, but they now have died from drought.
- Modern houses and educated children are common.

The criteria each group decided upon to define wealth were essentially the same. However, the men and the women emphasised different indicators to different degrees.

## Gender contrasts

### Men

- Good farmer with cattle.
- A well built home and educated children.

### Women

- Money through working in town.
- A fine home, educated children and regular purchases of groceries.

The tenor of their respective discussions was different. Men chose to emphasise productive labour on the land through cropping or livestock rearing, while the women stressed the importance of having access to money for groceries, school fees and all matters associated with childhood welfare. The women thus regarded urban employment as an important route to wealth. The men disagreed, stressing the need to be locally self-sufficient and not reliant on wages and the purchase of food.

## • Ranking

Following this discussion we were then prepared for the wealth ranking exercise. A set of cards had been produced beforehand, each with the name of a household in the research sample. It is important that no confusion arises over the definition of a particular household and each must be accepted as a unit by those involved in the ranking. In this case there was minimal debate as the research had established a reasonably stable definition of 'household' over the period of research. However, this took some time and there remained disputes over definition. It is important to remember that the household is a variable concept and drawing up a list from official records/censuses may cause problems, especially with the identification of the 'hidden poor'. Official lists therefore need to be complemented by local investigations and the wealth discussion can be a good forum for cross-checking any listings prepared for the ranking exercise.

A subgroup of the main discussion group was then asked to place each of the cards as they were read out in one of four piles (in fact, in four hats on the ground). These represented different wealth groups: 1 to 4. All cards were placed, after consensus had been reached, in one of the four hats. Cards that proved difficult to allocate were left until later. When all the cards had been allocated each pile was reviewed in order to see that the classification had been consistent. The ranking exercise was repeated with each of the discussion groups and an overall ranking based on the sum of each of the groups' scores has been produced.

As in the main discussion the debate was often intense. It again revealed much about the criteria actually used in viewing patterns of wealth. When a decision had to be made about the allocation of a particular card the participants would argue strongly about the various attributes of that home. In some cases livestock were emphasised; in others children's education; in other the access to remittance income. Always a complex interaction of factors were used to come to the final decision. It will be the next stage of this research to relate the local ranking using a composite set of factors of variable weightings to specific criteria using data from the household survey work.

In addition, the ranking has pointed to other areas for further investigation. Disagreements between members of a ranking group highlighted questions about particular households while different rankings between groups suggested the use of different criteria for particular cases. Of particular interest were the gender differences. For instance, women tended to rank higher those households with a migrant worker who was known to provide generous remittances for the rural home.

### • **Wealth ranking as an RRA tool**

Although this wealth ranking exercise was not carried out in an RRA context, it did serve to give rapid and detailed insight into particular facets of rural wealth differences and local perceptions. What about the applicability of this method in other contexts?

In this case it worked very effectively and fulfilled the objectives set for the exercise. However, the context in which these workshops were carried out must be recalled before drawing too many lessons for replication from this example. The people contributing to the debates and the ranking procedures had been involved in a participatory research process for nearly two years. They were not new to the idea of entering into a research dialogue and vigorously discussing issues in groups or as individuals. The level of involvement of the Mototi community in Mazvihwa has only been achieved

through a long process of research and involvement in the setting-up of small community development projects.

At the beginning of a research or development project, when a wealth ranking may be a good tool for framing further investigations, there is unlikely to be such a level of participation. Although RRA techniques can act as effective tools for encouraging local participation and control over a research project this has to be worked on. Wealth is a sensitive issue and the subject should be approached with caution if wealth ranking is to be used as an initial element of an RRA process. It is perhaps advisable to stick to private discussions and leave group debate for later explorations once the community fully understands the nature of the research and feels involved.

• **Ian Scoones,** Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK.

FURTHER READING

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