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Wealth ranking in Swaziland: a method to identify the poorest

Verona Groverman

• Introduction

Many development projects aim to improve the living situation of the poorer people. In so-called participatory projects the target group itself is highly involved in the implementation and at times identification and evaluation phases of the project. In less stratified societies it is difficult to identify the poorer men and women in order to approach them about the project and their possible involvement. Wealth ranking might be a method to select the poorer in a community.

• The setting

In the eighties the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations launched a special programme to reach the rural poor in Africa: the People's Participation Programme (PPP) and set up projects in eight countries. Part of the project staff, so-called 'group promoters', assist the men and women in group organisation, income-generation and in self-monitoring and evaluation, while living together with the people. Essential to the approach is that the people themselves decide about group membership and leadership and about the activities, while the project plays a guiding role.

I will not go into details of the project approach, the individual projects or the data collected as discussions at international, national and project levels have already taken place. Especially the definition of 'the rural poor' and the selection of beneficiaries were subjects of debates. The success in reaching the rural poor as the main beneficiaries varied

between the different projects. In one of the projects, in Swaziland, the method of wealth

ranking was tested for its suitability to identify the poorer community members.

I will describe our experience with wealth ranking in Swaziland, where I worked as a rural sociologist. My views do not necessarily represent those of FAO.

• Experiences in Swaziland

The PPP in Swaziland started in 1985. Five action areas for group formation were selected. The criteria used were not recorded clearly which made repetition of this selection procedure impossible. In 1988 the project staff decided to expand the project into two new areas. Discussions took place about which criteria to use for selecting suitable areas and potential beneficiaries and which methods could be applied for identification of both. The keyword was 'poor' but what is poor and how can one look for poverty and poor people? I will concentrate on the identification of potential beneficiaries in the selected areas.

To identify the poorer people, we were looking for a method which:

- could be carried out fast,
- did not involve a lot of 'researchers',
- was easy to learn and apply by the project staff, and,
- was not threatening since the main issue was the sensitive 'poverty'.

We decided to try a wealth ranking method and assess its usefulness afterwards. We used B. Grandins 'Wealth ranking in smallholder communities: a field manual' (ITP, 1988) (See RRA Notes 5). I prepared the training for the project staff and the planning of the different steps.

• **The planning: rapid or not rapid?**

In July 1989 a first meeting took place with all staff involved. There were nine women and two men, of which six female group promoters would do the fieldwork. A plan was made from the first steps of introduction to relevant authorities and extension staff of other projects in July to the follow-up of processing the collected data by wealth ranking in September. The first steps were essential since permission from the chiefs was required for any activity in their chiefdoms and we needed the assistance of other local staff to get relevant information.

Due to several reasons beyond our control this schedule proved impossible: the extension staff were too busy in July, the authorities were engaged in traditional (Royal) duties, and at times some of our own staff were not available. Finally, the data processing took place in December, and the follow-up was planned for February 1990.

Thus, the 'rapid' method was spread over a period of five months. The objective of the exercise changed: from 'identification of potential project beneficiaries and collection of relevant socio-economic data about the area to be followed by group formation based upon the information collected' to 'acquisition of the staff of understanding and practical skills for identification of potential beneficiaries' purposes'. In other words, instead of research it became a training in research.

Despite the long time period, when looking at the actual days of the exercise, the method can be called 'rapid' indeed:

- Training of project staff: 3 days
- Introduction to authorities

- and extension staff in the two areas: 4 days
- Preparations for the ranking: 8 days
- The ranking itself in 2 areas: 4 days
- The processing of the data: 1 day

• **The training and first steps towards the ranking**

The training of the project staff, not familiar with any theory or practice of research, seemed crucial. The method was discussed thoroughly and first steps taken. With a detailed map of the two new action areas we identified agro-ecological zones and decided to work in maize-production zones only. Then we defined what the appropriate type of community would be for the ranking exercise. This is quite a complicated discussion in a country where most of the people live scattered in isolated or somewhat clustered homesteads. We concluded that the neighbourhood is the smallest traditional administrative unit in a chiefdom in which the people have close social relations. The agricultural extension workers in the chosen areas were needed to identify all the neighbourhoods and choose representative ones for the ranking.

We talked about the concepts of wealth and household as the unit of research. We found a suitable word for wealth in the local language. But the household as being 'a group of people eating from the same pot', led to a long discussion: could we refer to the male heads of household when they were absent due to labour migration? Could we refer to the wife, but what to do in case of polygamy? We were aware that the men often sent little money home and that the women did not earn much money. Also the distribution of a man's income among his wives and of any other remittances were complex and secret matters. We decided to collect the names of the de jure heads of

household and to inquire about the situation of different wives if applicable.

Another topic of discussion was the choice of informants. Who could give the best information about the community in view of the patrilocal tradition: male or female informants? Since we were looking for people who know the place well, women or men who had been married longer were best. We decided to select two women and one man and to check if there were differences in the ranking. Here we also had to ask local people to help us with the choice.

During the training, a lot of time was spent on role plays about the introduction of the purpose of the visit and the explanation of the ranking to informants. I also held a few individual sessions with the group promoters doing the ranking to discuss problems that had arisen, for example with the representativity of communities.

• **The preparations for the ranking exercise**

The preparations for the actual ranking were the most time-consuming part. The six group promoters who were going to carry out the ranking consulted the runners (traditional officers, in charge of a community, who know all the people by name and in person) and the agricultural extension workers. In this way they got proper information about the communities and all the names of the heads of households in the representative communities. The extension workers chose the informants and made appointments for the group promoters

During the introduction visit to one of the areas we had an interesting discussion with the local authorities and extension staff. While asking about what defines a community we already got to know some of the problems. When talking about close social relations it was stated that “there was no co-operation any longer” and “people do not assist each other on the fields any longer” and “some do not go to their neighbour to borrow sugar”. When we added

that the relations also involved attendance of weddings and funerals they mentioned the neighbourhood as the appropriate smallest unit of close interaction.

• **The ranking**

The ranking was carried out in four communities in the two action areas using three informants each. Two group promoters and a supervising staff member, Aaron or myself collected the data in each community. Only three informants could be visited per day because the homesteads are scattered in hilly areas without public transport and many inaccessible roads.

Contrary to the first day, the extension workers were absent on the second day either due to a communication breakdown or lack of interest. On-the-spot solutions had to be found to find the addresses and to make the introduction possible. The main criteria used to select informants by the extension workers had apparently been ‘age’ - a drunkard was included, a blind man and a woman who had forgotten a lot. Also a few of the informants were not at home, maybe because no specific time for the visit had been given. We went around to find people at home who were willing to co-operate. Finally eight women and four men ranked the people in their communities. Some of the group promoters were more skilful than others to make the informants feel at ease while others got more information about the area and the people during the exercise - although they were not aware of it. They complained that the people talked around a question before giving an answer. Especially with older informants it took some time before they understood our intentions.

When the informants more or less understood the purpose of the visit, the ranking was done in a pleasant atmosphere. They ranked the community members easily, at the same moment explaining why and giving additional information. We noticed that the women talked more openly than the men.

“We arrived at a homestead with a few houses of stick and mud (some plastered) and of bricks, next to the dirt path. Goats and chickens walked around. Two young women were busy. An elderly woman with a child on her back came to greet us, followed by eight other children of different ages. She knew about our visit. We all sat down on mats under a tree. Lindiwe introduced us and explained the purpose of the interview. Nomsa added some details. The woman did co-operate, although she had ‘problems with her memory’. Lindiwe explained the cards with the names and gave an example of what she wanted to do. It became clear to the woman. She pointed to places on the ground for the piles when Lindiwe mentioned the names. At the same time the woman said why she put somebody on that pile: “they have money to hire a tractor”; “they do not have enough food and live in stick and mud houses”. She talked freely and without hesitating. Sometimes the extension worker had to explain the site of a homestead before she remembered the people. Nomsa wrote down the information on a record sheet. Afterwards Lindiwe inquired if the woman would have ranked differently if the names of the wives were mentioned - the answer was no. Referring to the widows she said that the children took care of them, only two women were worse off after the death of their husband. Lindiwe re-checked the piles but no changes were made. The ranking took about 25 minutes. Afterwards some additional questions were asked about income-generation and organisations in the area, prepared in advance by the group promoters. We thanked the woman very much for her assistance and left the place to visit another informant at the other side of the valley”.

• The results of the ranking

Finally, in December, the project staff gathered to process the data and to discuss the method.

The processing of the data collected was carried out as described by Grandin: from the records about the ranked heads of households of a community, an average score of the three informants per pile was calculated. Then the heads of household were rearranged on another sheet according to their score number from richest to poorest. Next we tried to group the households into a number of wealth strata not exceeding the total number of piles used by the informants. Here the problems started. There were no natural breaks between the scores to indicate clear strata. The result looked more like a continuum from rich to poor with clear criteria for wealthy and for non-wealthy people. All the informants had mentioned the same type of criteria during the ranking, referring to property and possibilities based upon the properties. Ownership of cattle, tractor, farm implements resulted in higher output of farming, more food and better houses. Those who did not own anything did not have the money to buy/rent farm implements and inputs, did not have enough to eat and lived in stick and mud houses.

The staff were quite disillusioned because during the ranking itself it had seemed that clear strata were given by the informants. However caution is needed when drawing conclusions because the data collection was a training exercise. The data from the first ranking looked less reliable than those from the second ranking. For example, the first time two group promoters collected data they had not been aware that two of the informants had ranked almost half of the people in one pile.

Originally we had planned to analyse differences in ranking between men and women but due to on-the-spot choice of informants we were not able to look at these differences. However, at least the names of the poorer people, or not-very-wealthy people were known. We decided that the staff would use this data to start their group formation work in the field. Depending on the situation in

the communities they would include other people and collect additional information.

• Conclusions

It can be concluded that wealth ranking is a method to get information about the way people in a community view wealth and how wealth is distributed in that community. In this sense it can be used to find the poorer people in a community as a starting point for the people's participation approach. Due to cultural and situational constraints the method might not prerequisites for successful use of wealth ranking. Firstly, a thorough training in research methodology for the project staff, preferably including outside assistants like extension workers, is needed. It should be spread over time to discuss the experiences with the different steps in the field. Secondly, a proper, but maybe more time-consuming, organisation of the ranking will give better results. Although it is stating the obvious, time constraints often prevent good arrangements.

Verona Groverman, Rural Sociologist,
Burgemeester Tellegenstr 212, 1073 KG
Amsterdam, Netherlands.

NOTES

Members of the Wealth-Ranking Team: **Cebsile Ginindza, Sibongile Mkhwanazi, Thembe Mhlanga, Lindiwe Ngcamphalala, Nomsa Mamba & Thelma Dlamini.**

be rapid over time but in total few days are needed.

In the beginning the group promoters found the ranking complicated, but when they carried it out it appeared simple. They felt four constraints: the long-winded stories of the informants, the informants' slow understanding of the purpose of the visit, the poor relations with the extension workers and the small number of visits per day due to the long distances between the homesteads.

Our experience in Swaziland has signalled two