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The elusive poor: a wealth of ways to find them
Report on IDS/IIED Seminar on wealth and well-being ranking

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• Background

During the autumn of 1991, the IDS (Institute of Development Studies, Sussex) and IIED (International Institute for Environment and Development) organised four seminars[1] on key developments in the use of PRA. At the first seminar, the participants exchanged experiences on recent innovations with wealth and well-being ranking.

Recently, much has changed, and subsequently spread, in methods to identify and understand socio-economic groups within a community. Since Barbara Grandin developed the card sorting by informants it has been applied worldwide and been followed by innovations such as social mapping. The importance and ease of such methods have led to greatly effective use in:

• targeting poorer groups for specific activities;

• monitoring the impact of aid distribution;

• removing biases in investigation by identifying informants from different socio-economic groups;

• for focused research and understanding specific constraints of different groups; and,

• understanding local criteria of wealth and mobility in wealth.

The purpose of the seminar on wealth and well-being ranking was to exchange ideas on new applications since Barbara Grandin published her now famous 'little blue book'[2]. The need to understand social and economic dimensions of rural research have led to a wide range of applications, from The Gambia to Bangladesh for monitoring, planning and training purposes. Despite the important contribution of these applications, wealth ranking is not able to overcome all problems of investigating social and economic dimensions of rural life. Certain aspects remain difficult to understand and need to be addressed by other methods or innovations.

To share and compare experiences and methods, eight presentations were given which are summarised below. Discussion followed, based on the main difficulties and successes identified and addressing the gaps and remaining limitations of existing methods.

A wealth of rankings

Wealth ranking (see Sarch; Mearns, this issue) by card sorting was pioneered by Barbara Grandin during work in Kenya with pastoral communities, for which she needed to select a limited number of households for a more detailed survey. What had initially been feared as an intrusive method was in fact enjoyed by

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[1] The other seminars focused on applications in health, the importance of sequences in PRA, and experiences in institutionalising PRA. The next *RRA Notes* will focus on the experiences shared at the health seminar.

[2] Wealth Ranking for Smallholder Communities: A Field Manual by Barbara Grandin, ITDG, 1988.

both the researchers and informants. It is based on individual interviews with people, who are asked to list the household and then sort cards, one for each household, into groups of relative wealth and status[3]. Much discussion ensues about local terms for wealth and what distinguishes different groups of wealth. Variations on this include:

- card sorting done by a group of community members;

- card sorting of individuals rather than into groups, when a small group of community members is involved; and,

- piles of beans, stones etc to form groups from which certain individual households can then be identified (see Schaefer, this issue).

Social mapping is a more visual method, pioneered by various groups in India, and conducted with a group (see Mukherjee; Pretty et al, this issue). First a map of the community is drawn, identifying each household. A group discussion follows on what constitutes wealth and well-being and agreement is reached on the main criteria. Next, each household is assessed using these well-being criteria, for which symbols are placed on the map. For example, people identify ownership of draught animals, level of schooling, size and type of house, labour, etc. In this way a visual map of socio-economic differences is created with group consensus.

Public meetings 'Pass the pen', is described by Chandramouli in *RRA Notes 14*, as a successful way to get reliable information about who the poorest of the poor are. In rural areas of Andhra Pradesh, the pen is identified with Saraswathi, the goddess of truth and learning. At the meeting, it was agreed that those holding the pen would speak only the truth. The group was asked to identify the poorest household who was handed the pen. After describing their conditions, which the group considered true, they then identified another of the poorest households who was next given the pen. In this way, the poorest are identified by common agreement.

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[3] See A User's Note on Wealth Ranking by Cards, this issue.

- **Presentations**

Barbara Grandin: The background of wealth ranking

Barbara highlighted the main steps of the card-sorting (see *A Users' Note: Wealth Ranking by Cards,* this issue). She was especially interested in the development from individual interviews into group interviews, reflecting on the popularity of the exercise with the local people she was working with. The need for privacy is not as important as it first seemed, being largely an apprehension in the minds of researchers rather than a taboo topic for local people.

The strengths of the method include detailed discussions on wealth and specific problems of wealth groups that concretises the informant's concepts on wealth. The success of the method hinges on identifying the most appropriate categories to be ranked, which should be a commonly understood unit of social organisation. This is especially important where women and men function in separate economic units, and not in a homogenous household. Barbara also stressed the importance of checking the outcome which might lead to the repositioning and reshuffling of some of the households. Questions she remains with include:

- Do different people use different criteria?
- Do different people in the hierarchy rank people in a consistently different manner?

Marie-Therese Sarch: Adoption of new agricultural technology in The Gambia

Marie-Therese presented the main learning points from her work in The Gambia (see Sarch, this issue). She had used wealth ranking by cards in two different villages, ranking different units in both. One village was too small to rank compounds (made of multiple households) so *dabadas* (farming units) were chosen. While in the first village group interviews had been possible, the onset of rains influenced the ranking procedure in the second village where individual interviews were necessary. Overall well-being was related to how long food supplies would last within each compound, and the availability of traction and of labour. The final results were an

amalgamation of the men's and the women's groups and showed, in both villages, that new agricultural trials had eluded the poorest: in Boiram 8 of the 11 trials were within the richest group, while in Yonna the trials were reaching the middle of the range. Marie-Therese signalled the need to investigate more on intra-household perceptions of well-being.

Verona Groverman: People's participation programme, Swaziland

Since 1985 the FAO has been involved in Swaziland with group promoters. In 1989, Verona worked with helping them better to target the poor. Due to male out-migration, she encountered problems in identifying clear households and communities. They did eventually use the names of the male heads of households. Much time was spent on training the group promoters to use wealth ranking, which included role plays, as they had limited research experience. In total the entire process, including analysis, of wealth ranking took 4 to 5 months, partly because the homesteads were very far apart and interviews were limited to 3 per day. After Verona left the project, wealth ranking continued to be used to start up work in certain areas but is not yet being used to target poor people. (See Groverman, *RRA Notes 9*).

Ian Scoones: Wealth ranking in Zimbabwe

Ian presented a comparison of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods for 71 households in Zimbabwe. He focused on the divergence of 3 rankings and on the clustering of data. Of the 71 households, 10 were ranked differently by the women, men and researchers, with the women ranking all higher. Particular criteria of these households give clues as to why this was the case:

- 5 had few material assets but received cash remittances, which are important to women;
- 3 had other forms of income, especially during the dry season; and,
- 2 were female headed households, with cash earning activities.

The three rankings had each produced 4 piles of wealth groups. Then, using a statistical model, 8 variables were chosen to force the 71 households into 4 clusters. These variables included grain yield/sales, house type, cattle yields/sales, cash income. In the statistical model, the variables were not weighted which had been the case with the wealth ranking by the farmers. Three were ranked higher by local growers than the statistical model. These were households who were highly respected and had power. One of the households had been assumed to receive a higher income by fellow villagers. Of the two households that had been ranked lower by farmers than in the statistical model, one case was a recently widowed person who was rich now but would be less rich in future. The other household depended on occasional employment but was unemployed at the time of the wealth ranking.

There was a relatively high correlation between the wealth ranking and the statistical analysis. One of the key differences between the two approaches seems to be that the qualitative, i.e. wealth ranking, method can include intangible variables, such as power and the potential for income earning. Wealth ranking relies on recall and certain assumptions about wealth, allowing for the analysis of divergence between men and women. Finally, from the statistical model it became apparent that caution was necessary when using proxies to identify wealth, as the correlation was not always positive.

Alice Welbourn[4]: Applications in the analysis of difference

Instead of wealth ranking, Alice proposed socio-economic dimension ranking (SEDR) as a more accurate, though admittedly cumbersome term. For example, an Imam, though owning few assets, has access to many and would therefore score high with SEDR as opposed to wealth. Alice has been using wealth ranking by cards in training development workers to identify differences within the community for a range of purposes, from assessing who benefits from an intervention to monitoring attendance of meetings. Although she has been particularly interested in gender aspects, differences due to age, gender, ethnic group or well-being also

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[4] See RRA and the Analysis of Difference, Welbourn, RRA Notes 14.

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differ for each situation. For example, in Ghana, she found that while the young men had more consistent rankings, the older men had more divergent opinions. The older men came from different backgrounds and used different criteria. In Sierra Leone, where the male patron-client relationships were very strong and crucial for survival, she looked at the differences between men's and women's rankings. She found that their responses during the process were partly related to the roles they have: women were more open than men, who saw ActionAid as a potential patron. Using a Spearman rank correlation, she found that the rankings from the men and the women were not consistent and, if used alone, would be inadequate. Rather than determining who is correct, such differences should be seen as a springboard to further discussion.

Robin Mearns: Wealth ranking in Mongolia

Wealth ranking was used in Mongolia (see Mearns, this issue) to overcome the pervasive 'average block', probably linked to the official ideology of equality, which has led to a dearth in any differentiated data. Robin used wealth ranking within the largely pastoral communities to better understand existing differences in vulnerability and the attitude towards risk and risk management. Indirectly it also served to generate interest in more participatory forms of research.

Helen Young and Suzanne Jaspers: Wealth ranking and nutritional surveys

In Darfur, Sudan, wealth ranking was used in a nutritional survey during a period of chronic food insecurity. The same communities were visited several times and involved with other RRA techniques and anthropometrical studies, linked to a one-off distribution of oil and lentils. It proved a very valuable technique, providing much new information that was not ascertained by other methods, while being less dependent on the interviewing style than other questions were. They found that wealth is not static, with households moving in and out of wealth groups, for example due to loss of livestock or a reaccumulation of assets through migration. This was confirmed by a longitudinal study based on random sampling. Remittances from Libya seemed to be of

particular importance. A particularly interesting finding was that families with malnourished children were spread over all wealth strata and did not always correspond to the list of neediest people drawn up by the village committee. The use of wealth ranking affected the targeting practice with a compromise being made between the needy and the malnourished.

Parmesh Shah: AKRSP (India), Gujarat

The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India) has used wealth ranking in the appraisal process, with continual monitoring to evaluate the impact of its work on natural resource development activities (see *RRA Notes 13* for more details). Wealth ranking is used in a sequence of mapping exercises which starts with a street household map. AKRSP has found a high correlation between this and caste/economic groups. The households are grouped and a geographically focused assessment of wealth is carried out. They have found wealth ranking with cards to be a problem in the heterogeneous societies they work in, unless it is done within a street where one caste is concentrated. There are two possible sequences: with the discussion on wealth groups/criteria following or preceding the ranking. AKRSP have used four types of well-being ranking:

- the classic clustering with cards;
- social mapping;
- group discussion; and,
- asset mapping, where less eye-to-eye contact has reduced inhibitions in discussions.

They usually start with identifying low extremes of well being, with other families placed within that continuum. AKRSP have found it to be especially useful for:

- encouraging community discussions in planning and making decision about scarce resources;
- application as a sampling technique; and,
- increasing the effectiveness and reliability of all other subsequent RRA methods.

- **Plenary discussion**

Following the presentations, discussion developed on six key issues:

1. Qualitative vs. quantitative ranking: how to cluster groups with the card sorting, validity and dangers of grouping;
2. Sensitivity of the method to 'correct' application: need for sequences and rapport, degrees of detailed/accurate information;
3. Definitions of method and units: unit of wealth ranking, criteria of wealth;
4. How informants influence results: gender, age, groups vs individuals, divergence in comparative studies;
5. Applicability: for vulnerability analysis, possible limitations for urban use, to encourage attitude shift, for sampling or evaluation; and,
6. Limitations: well-being status changes over time, divergence of rankings, processes, order of magnitude.

Most comments and queries focused on definitions, applicability and sensitivity.

Definitions

The term 'wealth' ranking is not an ideal term. It implies a mainly materialistic focus on assets. Barbara Grandin originally focused intentionally on 'assets' for her research, forcing people to understand that there was no homogeneity while avoiding the vaguer term 'wealth'. Socio-economic dimension ranking, though more accurate, is a rather unwieldy term. Referring to `well-being' ranking would encourage a reorientation towards the idea of quality of life, while vulnerability analysis implies a negative characteristic.

The final choice of appropriate local units to rank is context specific, and depends on practical aspects such as the size of the community. There are no examples written up of ranking of women (not just by them) as compared to the standard ranking of men as heads of households, which hides inter-household differences in areas where polygamy is practised. To understand such distinctions and how these contribute to individual well-being or development potential, it would be necessary to rank the sub-units within which wives and co-wives are organised.

Applicability

Wealth ranking is a means to help target the poorest of the poor. It can encourage an attitude change within agencies better to consider who they can realistically help: those with direct welfare needs and/or those with development possibilities. However, in communities where everybody is subject to considerable stress such as is the case with refugees, wealth ranking seems to provide irrelevant details. There the differences in well-being would seem to be increasingly marginal and wealth ranking less suitable. Its use for people in distress should probably be avoided. Beyond a certain limit, attempting to pick out variations in stress, malnourishment and misery would appear to be irrelevant.

Can wealth ranking be used to help people understand their relative position as a basis for action? Do villagers themselves learn from wealth ranking? Wealth ranking allows local criteria for well-being to determine the grouping of households/individuals. Its potential to help people understand their own socio-economic position could be considered as a means of conscientization. In a recent survey, it appeared that where ActionAid had been using RRA, there was a more positive response from communities than where they had not been using it. But most of this evidence remains anecdotal and would require more research to understand the long term impact.

Scaling up wealth ranking for use in larger communities or for example at district level, seems difficult. As it is based on people's knowledge of each other, this would prove more difficult in larger areas. Where mobility of the population is high, the 'community' is more difficult to define. Further use of wealth ranking in urban areas is needed to understand whether it can be an effective and accurate method.

Sensitivity

During her work in Sudan, Helen Young was identified with the relief agencies and the one-off distribution of food aid. What happens to

the integrity of future wealth ranking by cards if the community sees that only certain groups benefit from it? Experiences from India (see Shah above and Chandramouli, *RRA Notes 14*) indicate that this does not have to be a problem, as consensus is reached by large community groups. But not all villages are the same. If we assume there are basically two types of villages: one based on exploitation and one based on congenial relationships despite wealth differences, it is clear where the use of wealth ranking would be less smooth!

Hesitance in the use of wealth ranking seems to be a problem more for outsiders, who consider wealth a sensitive topic, than for local community members. The key appears to be that such rankings are always relative comparisons of wealth, and do not require discussion of absolute income or numbers of livestock. The increasingly common and straightforward use of card-sorting with a group of people rather than individuals bears this out.

Questions left unanswered

Wealth ranking offers a snapshot socio-economic picture of the community. But what happens over a 5, 10, 15 year period? In some cases, people have probed successfully about mobility between the groups by asking, for example: *Does anyone from pile X ever move to pile Y (richer) or pile Z (poorer)? When, how often, why does this happen?*

Are there alternative ways to map out different types of relationships, such as the patron-client links that influence well-being and vulnerability? (see Howes, *RRA Notes 12* for some ideas).

Wealth ranking seems to be one of the more difficult ideas to pass on to community facilitators. This is probably related to the perceived sensitivity of a topic such as wealth. Also, while providing a list and grouping of households, it then seems to be difficult to probe further about why this differentiation of wealth occurs. How can this be resolved in training? We eagerly await tips!

Who does the survey? What type of biases enter if different people conduct the interviews? How does the outsider, in specific,

influence the process - beneficially, as someone who will not stay and abuse the information, or negatively, as a stranger you do not confide in?

How can wealth ranking be used over a large area, such as for nationwide surveys? Can wealth indicators for use in survey design be derived by discussing the criteria? What is its value for organisations that have a district or provincial focus? How can it be linked to development planning at these levels or be used to rank a cluster of villages?

There is one particular danger of wealth ranking that has been recently noted. It relates to the collection of information about individual households. If the assets and components of households are recorded in reports against the names of households, then this is exactly the kind of information that could be used or misused by various authorities, such as income tax, governments, police etc. It has been recommended that reports with this information should contain only codes for households, and these codes be kept under lock and key by the investigating institutions.

Please let us know of any experiences related to these questions and to well-being ranking in general.

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