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The 'Beans-Game': experiences with a variation of wealth ranking in the Kivu Region, Eastern Zaire.

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• Background

This variation of a wealth ranking exercise was used in the context of a mid-term field survey. It involved socio-economic analysis and differentiation of the target population of a rural development project in Zaire and was funded by GTZ (German Governmental Agency of Technical Cooperation). The survey was carried out by a multidisciplinary team of postgraduate students from the Centre for Advanced Training in Agricultural Development (CATAD), Technical University of Berlin, Germany.

The project area is located in the most densely populated part of Zaire. The population faces severe problems of degradation of resources which the project tries to tackle. The purpose of the analysis and differentiation of the target population was to adapt the project's activities to the needs of the people through having more detailed information about the different sub-groups.

• The procedure

The exercise was conducted with self-established self-help groups of about 10-20 participants of mixed sex. These groups have developed from religious groups with social development goals and are comparatively homogeneous in socio-economic terms. One exercise was carried out in each community included in the research.

A small heap of beans (a major staple in the region) was put in the middle of the circle of participants. A short story helped to explain the exercise:

"These beans represent all the members in your community, which have assembled at the chief's house. The chief says: 'I know that the people in our village are not all the same, some are richer and some are poorer than others. I would like to know how many groups of the same level of well-being there are, so please divide yourselves into groups of similar wealth'".

We avoided giving examples of possible ways to group the beans. The group was then asked to divide the beans into smaller heaps. When this was done, each heap was identified as a group of villagers (landless, farmers, merchants, etc) and they were ranked according to wealth by asking: "Which heap represents the poorest?".

To cross-check, the group was asked whether they all agreed with the division of the beans and whether some people or groups had been forgotten. (The size of the different heaps - or wealth groups can also be corrected at this point.). When this was done, questions about the characteristics of each group, their sources of income, etc. were be posed. Later the relationships between each of the groups can be explored. Questions we asked included: How can one move up the social ladder? Who will seek assistance/credit with whom? Which groups can intermarry? Which group employs members of the other groups for what sort of work? What means of payment exist?

After this discussion, changes in the community can be explored by asking: has the size of the different groups changed during the last years/decade? In which way and why? Have the relationships changed?

The findings

The results of the beans 'game' provided insights into the social and economic relationships between the different sub-groups within the communities and rough estimates of their size. They provided qualitative information and gave clues about the differentiation of the target population. This was then linked to the quantitative data that was obtained by a standard questionnaire and measurement of fields.

Local criteria for differentiation included:

- capacity of families to send their children to school (quantified in years);
- professions; and,
- frequency of employment of agricultural workers or employment by others.

Why beans?

The beans helped to make an abstract question more tangible. The participants were animated and thought using beans as a focus of discussion was unusual and fun. The game-like process of the group interview made it easier to discuss potentially sensitive topics like social stratification and segregation without having to mention names.

Suggestions for improvement

As the process of making piles was not directed by the interviewers, the different groups produced very different results. Both the criteria for differentiation and the number of piles of beans varied widely. Two major shortcomings of the procedure became evident:

- the results of the different groups were too different to allow comparison; and,
- the composition of the discussion-groups was fairly homogeneous and only one group was interviewed per community.

Results could be cross-checked by conducting several exercises per community with different social groups. The results could be reassessed by the discussion groups themselves, by presenting the other groups' results to each group. In this way, more can be learnt about

the relevance of the criteria used to distinguish groups and the assessment of socio-economic relationships by different social groups. These changes would produce more reliable estimates of the size of each sub-group and its proportion of the overall population of the community.

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