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STRATEGIES FOR BASELINE AND EVALUATION RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN CENTRAL AFRICA

Presentation for

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I. Introduction

Central Africa--Zaire, CAR, Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea--is one of the most difficult areas in the world in which to do research, and it seems to get more difficult every year. Yet it also the location of the world's second largest tropical forest, home to a wealth of biodiversity, with unique plant, animal and human resources. **[MAP of CAFZ]**

I have worked in Zaire and Cameroon on several baseline and evaluation efforts in the ag/NRM area: notably the ag portion of USAID/Zaire's mission-wide WID evaluation, the impact of 10 years of fish culture in Zaire, baseline and design of monitoring and evaluation of a project for women farmers in Bandundu Zaire, and baseline research for IITA's new Humid Forest Station in southern Cameroon. [Women Farmers in Bandundu, Handbook]

Today I want to share some of my experience about research approaches in this sector in this region. First I will talk about the context of the research and how to think through what is important and what is not. All too often researchers collect much more information than can analyzed or disseminated (I have been guilty of that) and in this region research costs are particularly high. Second, I will discuss some research approaches that can cut costs and maximize good information. Finally, I will address the issue of linkages between evaluation or other "operations" research and program planning by looking at the how the *process* of research and evaluation can be used to rethink the development effort. Also I'll make a plea for better quality control and sharing of information in operations research. This type of research often does not get published but can provide very useful information.

II. Context of the Research

Baseline research is carried out before a project or an activity gets started. Several kinds of studies can be commissioned in order to describe the beneficiary population in terms of major stratifications and activities, and to ascertain the level of wellbeing, etc. In central Africa a major concern is the availability of good statistical information. Even if production and population data are available, often the quality is poor. There is very little information available on production of and trade in staple foods, which some have argued has led to a perhaps false assumption that food production is declining (Guyer). If the quality of the data is acceptable, the interpretations can vary widely because of lack of knowledge of context. For example, the interpretation of data in one study on female headed households in Kinshasa is widely disputed. In another study, possibly erroneous correlations were made between inheritance patterns and cassava production.

Other methodologies for collecting information, such as rapid rural appraisals (focus groups) and quick surveys can be problematic as well because of the oppression of rural people. For example, compulsory cultivation still took place in Zaire in the mid to late 1980s, so it was difficult to get good information from farmers on constraints to ag/NRM productivity. Their biggest constraint was the Zairian state! Under these conditions, the interpretation of focus group information is also very critical. One RRA concluded that markets should be

organized at the level of the collectivity--an extremely dangerous conclusion given the historical role of collectivity officials (who are not traditional authorities) in extracting surplus from the peasantry.

Care must be taken in choosing host country collaborators for research as well. Some ethnic groups may not be welcome in the territory of other ethnic groups. In Cameroon, my research assistant had problems in Beti country because of his Bamileke background (but it was still preferable to have a Bamileke than another Beti). Some collaborators may be politically motivated (the co-author of the fish culture evaluation is now governer of Bandundu, and was always trying to put in positive statements about the MPR[1] into the evaluation). In Zaire, all extension agents were suspect, as they routinely collected huge fines from farmers for failure to plant or harvesting without permission.

There may be pressure to show success or impact in evaluations. In one evaluation I worked on, the principal author was not allowed to leave the country until the evaluation was rewritten in a more positive light. She was then "blacklisted." This problem is all the more tragic as it prevents good information and lessons from being circulated and heeded. At USAID/Zaire, there were 27 ag projects and 27 failures (as reported to me by an ag officer). Some projects could have been improved, and greater attention could have been paid to the patterns of failure.

What information is important and what information is less important: Since it is so costly to collect information from the field, care must be taken to maximize the returns to research labor. I will speak mainly about information to be collected in the ag/NRM area but some of the points will apply to other sectors.

1. There is great variation among sites even in seemingly "homogeneous" territory. For each site visited, get a sense of the history and social organization by asking a few simple questions such as: When was the village founded? How many clans live in the village? Is there a founding/dominant clan? Are there major occupations or specializations in the village (e.g. handicrafts, processing of food or beverage)? This information helps put the survey, RRA or evaluation into perspective.

2. Try to talk to people informally after any survey or focus group. In several cases, I uncovered serious problems with a project that did not emerge in the focus group. For example, some women did not want to use a maternity clinic because they felt that it was too costly and there were too many restrictions, yet they were being pressured into using the clinic.

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[1]Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution (Mobutu's party-state).

3. Beware of superficial questions. For example, asking women "are you married?" often has no meaning, as there are so many different levels and types of marriage and other social ties equally or more important than marriage. It is more important to ascertain how women and men get access to resources such as land either through marriage or through fathers, brothers or uncles. You need to do your homework first to ascertain these patterns BEFORE asking the questions.

4. Be aware of seasonality. In many cases, people do different things depending upon the season. If you want to rank activities in terms of importance or impact, make sure that you have specificied the season.

5. "Externalities" may be more important than internal factors in looking at the success or failure of an activity. What is happening in local or global markets or political arenas can be much more important than factors such as technology adoption at the local level. In fact, these "externalities" often condition local peoples abilities to adopt or use technology or to organize for better efficiency.

6. Local taxonomies need to be used in any questionnaire. For example, we asked people to rank the "greens" that they ate, and included peanuts in this category. Local people counted peanuts as a sauce to be eaten with every meal and not as a "legume."

III. Research approaches that actually work to get good baseline information and perform useful evaluations.

We have just talked about a lot of the problems and constraints to doing good operations research in central Africa. It is not hopeless, however. Here are a few lessons that can help you design and implement useful research:

1. Do a thorough literature review, including materials available only in-country (at universities, local bookstores, NGOs, libraries, etc.) and unpublished materials (such as dissertations and trip reports). Analyze gaps in the literature (see IITA monograph). Ideally a baseline study should be a two-phased activity that starts by looking at how a project or activity can contribute to knowledge and support ongoing development in the area and then proceeds to describe the population and its activities..

2. Use students, academics and NGO employees who have studied the topic or a related topic, but not necessarily someone who has worked extensively in the region who may have vested interests. Take care with hiring former governmental/parastatal employees who may have a lot of knowledge but be perceived as powerful actors in the community. Read the person's materials carefully before hiring them. Did they actually do fieldwork? Did they actually interview people? Did they do survey work, and were they able to analyze results? Could they interpret and write up results? In general, it is a good idea to keep and update files on good researchers in country.

3. Link survey work with ongoing ethnographic or other long-term studies or monitoring. In Cameroon, the country-wide baseline survey of ag/NRM practices was linked to a two-year (and ongoing) ethnographic/economic study of ag/NRM strategies and market opportunities. The same sampling frame could be used for further studies. (Describe from Handbook., Russell 1993)

4. For evaluations, take time to interview a sample of people who did not partcipate in the activity, who dropped out or who were unsuccessful (see sample questionnaire for agribusiness assessment). We did this in fish farmer study and it led to some interesting conclusions about who can and cannot be become a successful fish farmer. This hypothesis was later born out by ICLARM studies of fish farming (Lightfoot, personal communication).

5. Surveys should be preceded by fieldwork and thoroughly field tested. Eliminate confusing, sensitive and difficult questions. For example one question in the Cameroon ag/NRM survey took up almost an hour of the interview time, and people were tired after answering this question. Simplify and pre-code as much as possible--this will involve upfront work with key informants.

6. Gender dissagregation is important but there are other major distinctions that are equally important: age, education, occupation or former occupation and position in society (chief, teacher, catechist).

7. Focus groups should include people from different categories but there still may not be enough variety. Interview folks separately: young men and women, older men and women, church group, lineage heads or other traditional leaders, etc.

8. Be willing and eager to answer questions about yourself and about the research. Take the time necessary to answer questions. Be humble and insist on humility from all of your associates.

9. Do not distribute gifts to people in return for their participation in the research. This will often result in hard feelings and take up a lot of time. Gifts can only be given by those who have spent extensive time in the area and who understand who is in a position to receive and distribute appropriate gifts.

10. Protect your informants and do not needlessly share sensitive information. One ODA colleague took an unpublished study of mine into a village where I was working and brandished it around. I had not yet shared the report with the chief and he was upset to see that someone else was reading about his village before he had a chance to read the material.

11. High school or middle school students can used for monitoring activities, and people can also be asked to monitor project results themselves. They are much more likely to monitor something that they have chosen and that directly interests them. For example, farmers in the IITA area wanted to test a certain type of cassava planting method and a certain variety

and set up experimental plots on their own. They then weighed tubers at harvest to see what worked the best.

IV. Links between research and project planning and programming.

A caveat on participatory studies: In principle, the greater participation of the potential beneficiaries, the more sustainable the benefits of a project or activity. This principle can lead to great problems in central Africa, however. First, people may not be able to participate because of political or economic constraints; second, you may be asking people to take up a lot of time when they get little real benefit; third, participation can lead to disputes. If you want to use participatory methodologies, you must be ready to be in it for the long haul and take care not to expose informants to time wasting and potentially dangerous information gathering/sharing exercises. Also, you must make clear exactly what KIND of participation is called for: are you going to allow beneficiaries to determine revenue flows? Expansion to other beneficiaries? Access to all project information including managers' salaries?

Another caveat: you may get great information as a result of baseline and evaluation studies, but you may not be able to use it. For example, no one wanted to know about the real constraints to producers in rural Zaire until it was too late. I have interesting information on "alternative" income generating strategies in Cameroon but cannot publish this material as it would compromise informants. Much of the revenue that people generate in central Africa is illegal (hence why it is so difficult to get good information).

Better operations research means better scopes of work for research. CDIE has a good publication on how to write SOWs for research. It also means better sharing of research. One suggestion that is made is the creation of a journal for operations research. There are already a couple of publications that are more informal: Culture and Agriculture; Political Ecology Society journal (online); Development in Practice; Agroforestry Systems. Also there are now many online discussion groups such as Gender-CG where people can share results of survey work. or even get advice on how to write scopes of work or contact experts in the field.

Given the above, I see three important links between good baseline and evaluation research and better projects and programs:

1. Project design can reflect what people are actually doing. As a result of our baseline study in Cameroon, IITA/HFS's experiments are now based more on existing farming systems of the humid forest zone than on labor-intensive agroforestry techniques developed in Nigeria

2. Capacity building. Research should be grounded in and support capacity and institution building--not be an add-on. Both my research assistants were hired as permanent employees at IITA. They know farmers really well as a result of participating in the baseline studies.

They could have been monitoring certain households over time if things were set up better (institutional memory is SO important!).

3. Evaluations can help to avert serious problems. In Zaire, the maize project was getting women to work on maize and neglecting their food fields. The evaluation pointed out the need to concentrate on women-controlled crops. Subsequent project (our project in Bandundu) focused on these strategic crops (squash, peanuts).

V. Conclusion

We can take time later to discuss specific methodologies and approaches--how to construct survey instruments and design evaluation and monitoring systems. This talk presented some of the highlights of my experience in baseline and evaluation research in central Africa. The important points to keep in mind include:

1. The high cost of doing research in the area necessitates careful and thoughtful strategies, with an eye toward long-term capacity building.

2. There are important economic and political constraints to beneficiary participation in research, as well as to getting and sharing good information.

3. It is important to choose research partners carefully and let them say what they need to say.