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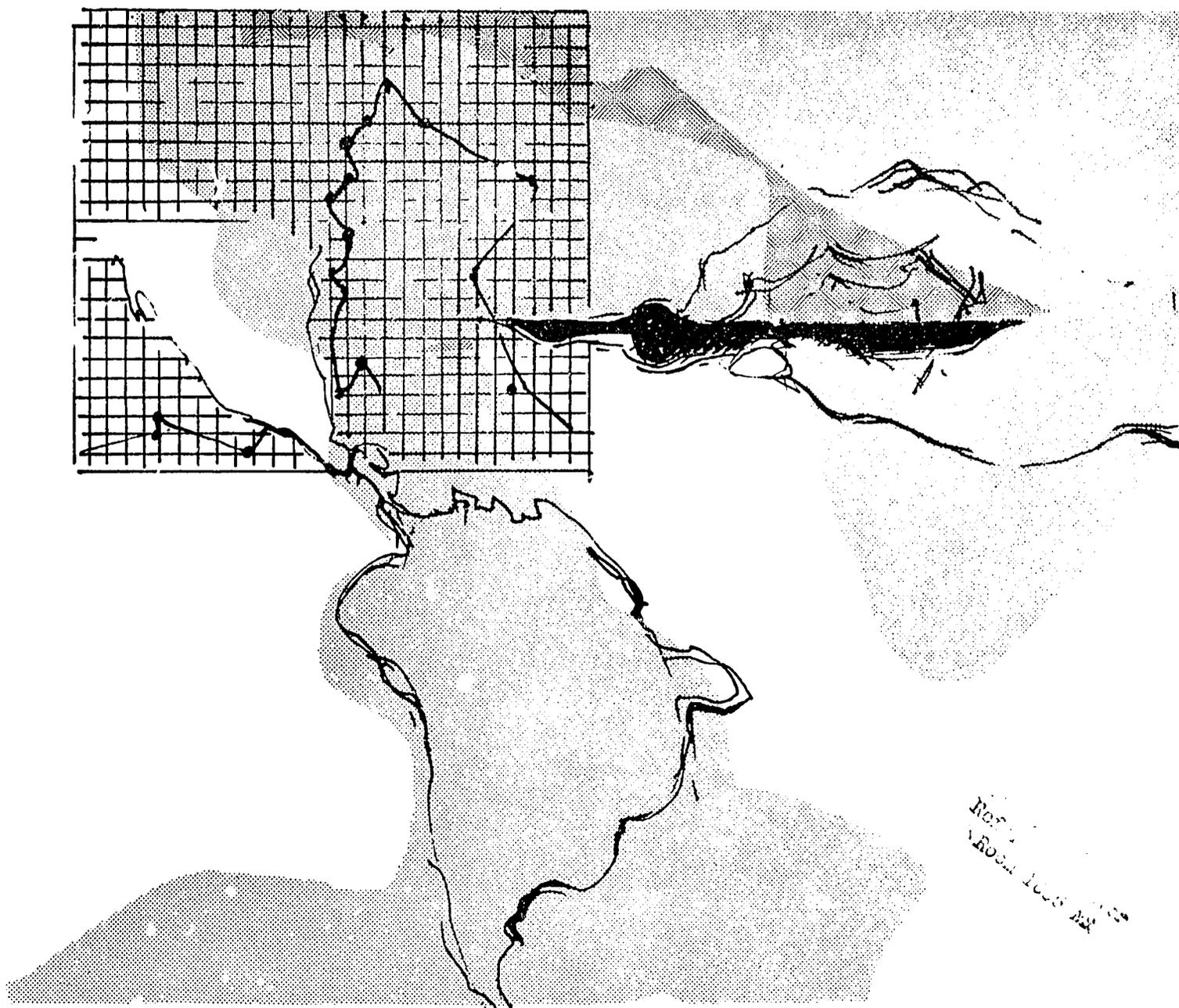
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GATHERING SURVEY DATA FOR AGRARIAN LEGAL STUDIES IN LATIN AMERICA

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GATHERING SURVEY DATA FOR AGRARIAN

LEGAL STUDIES IN LATIN AMERICA

by

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During the past year I have been conducting a study of Colombian water rights and legislation, particularly in reference to irrigation and land use. This included studying not only the legislation in the books and the procedures or regulations established by the agencies charged with administering such laws and regulations, but also the application, enforcement and effectiveness of these laws and regulations at the operational level--at the level of the actual water user.

An integral part of this project included a study of the administration and operation of the irrigation districts of Coello and Saldaña, in the Department of Tolima, since these are the only large irrigation districts presently in operation in Colombia. This involved taking interviews of a representative sample of producers operating within the area covered by the districts in order to determine what users themselves felt about the operation of the districts, their personnel, policies and regulations, and the like.

Because this was the first time I had ever tried to set up and conduct a field research study, and because I had no academic background on the methodology of social research, I encountered many unforeseen problems and difficulties which I had to resolve in a common sense manner as each one came up. While these problems or considerations may seem old-hat to experienced social researchers, they may be of interest to those with little or no academic or practical experience in field research, particularly those coming to Latin America for the first time.

Below, then, follows a summary of the different stages followed in conducting one particular field research project, the main problems encountered, how they were solved, as well as some comments and suggestions.

A. Drafting the Questionnaire

Needless to say, this is the first hurdle of any field research problem. Drafting a good questionnaire would seem to involve two different stages: a substantive stage and a mechanical or procedural stage.

The first stage is mainly one of determining what one is looking for: the information to be derived from the interviews. In order to do this, the drafter must first obtain a fairly good background on the subject he is going to study. In my case, this entailed acquiring a knowledge of Colombian water legislation and land tenure problems and reading the available material on the irrigation districts, such as prior studies or reports, the laws and decrees relating to the districts, and the regulations adopted by the districts for their operation. This reading was supplemented by visits to the area and conversations with personnel at the head office of the Caja Agraria in Bogotá, personnel at the field, former employees of the districts, and other people who had some knowledge of the districts. Presupposed is a certain familiarity with the social, economic and political situation of the country where the study is to be made.

Only after so proceeding will the drafter of the questionnaire have sufficient information on the area to be studied to enable him to determine the data he wants to derive from his study and formulate the hypotheses to be tested. Once such purposes of the study have been reasonably established, the drafter then proceeds to the procedural stage, that is, formulating the questionnaire in a manner that will satisfy these purposes in the most efficient and expeditious manner.

At this stage, the amateur field researcher suddenly finds himself in completely unfamiliar territory, and discovers that drafting a questionnaire is not quite as easy as he had imagined it to be. Thus, he must again go through a period of preparation, which in a typical case might consist of the following steps:

1. Studying past questionnaires of people with experience in the field.
2. Talking with these people in order to get a general idea of the methods of constructing a questionnaire.
3. Accompanying them in field studies in order to observe the effectiveness of the questionnaires, as well as the techniques of interview taking.

4. Drafting a primary questionnaire and showing it to knowledgeable people for comments and suggestions.
5. Testing it two or three times to see how it works, and making the necessary changes before initiating the definite study.

Observing some of the following points will also facilitate the subsequent field interviewing:

1. Keep the questionnaire as short as possible. In the first place, people are usually reluctant to be interviewed. This reluctance can generally be overcome and the person interviewed made to take an interest in the questions. But if the interview lasts for more than an hour, he is apt to lose interest in the questions, become impatient, and begin to provide whatever answers he feels will most rapidly conclude the interview, whether or not these accurately reflect his own particular situation.
2. Avoid abstract or hypothetical questions. Campesinos are apt to have difficulty in projecting themselves into non-existing situations. If this type of question is required, it is better to phrase it in the present tense rather than the conditional; e.g., "You have 100 pesos today, how are you going to spend it" rather than "If you were given 100 pesos...." Also, questions should be aimed at or relate directly to the person being interviewed rather than be general in nature. Thus, a better response is obtained from a question asking "Are you willing to spend one or two days attending demonstrations or courses on the uses of irrigation" rather than "Do you think it would be useful to attend courses...etc." This last type of question is almost always bound to be answered affirmatively, whether or not the person would in actuality attend such courses.
3. When possible, keep the questions from being too intimate or personal, or from delving too deeply into financial matters. Questions of this nature must of necessity appear in almost every questionnaire, but there is always an adverse reaction or suspicion towards them. It is better not to ask these until the interviewer has established friendly relations with the subject of the interview and to do it in an informal and round-about fashion.

B. Establishing rapport with concerned government agencies or entities

In many cases, a field research project will directly or very closely concern an evaluation of the work of a particular government or public agency. Examples of this would be studies on the supervised credit programs of the local land reform agency, studies on the operation of public irrigation districts, and the like.

The particular agencies involved do not as a rule receive these studies with open arms but rather view with some alarm the prospect of American-financed interviewers running around their area of jurisdiction questioning the local inhabitants about the work of that agency. With some justification, they often feel that the main purpose of these studies is to criticize and belittle their efforts. Consequently, they may initially be reluctant to in any way cooperate with the study, and provide a cold reception to any requests for information.

Yet, it is very important to establish good relations with such agencies. They can greatly facilitate the interviewer's task through the provision of maps, names, suggestions, and data. Also it is much easier to work in an area where there is not an atmosphere of antagonism or tension, and a researcher never knows when he'll have to resort to such agencies for future information. In addition, it will facilitate future studies in the area and leave a good name for the institution sponsoring the study.

It will profit the interviewer, then, to meet the officials of the concerned agency prior to initiating the field work, both at the head office in the capital, and at the local level. At such meetings, he should explain the purpose of the study and emphasize that its purpose is not to criticize but rather to obtain and provide a fair understanding and evaluation of agency operations. A copy of the questionnaire should be submitted for comments and suggestions and proposed changes adopted when feasible.

Sympathy for the agencies' problems, which will almost certainly be expounded in great detail by the local officials, should be expressed, as well as a readiness to consult with them whenever they feel it necessary.

On the other hand, it should be emphasized that the interviewer should not work so closely with the particular agency as to run the danger of becoming identified with it.

That is, the people in the area may come to consider the interviewer as an employee or official of the agency whose work he is trying to evaluate and, as a consequence, supply answers which they think the agency wants to hear rather than independent opinions. For these reasons, interviewers should not too often use the vehicles of the particular agency, or accompany its employees in their field visits, particularly for purposes of taking interviews.

C. Establishing contacts with other agencies or individuals

It is also a good idea to talk over the project with some of the officials of other agencies or institutions which play an important role in the area to be studied, such as the Agricultural Credit Bank, Rice Growers' Association, Cotton Development Institute and the like. These people generally have a good knowledge of local conditions, enjoy good contacts, can provide invaluable help in locating people to interview, and may provide excellent leads concerning local situations or arrangements whose existence was entirely unsuspected and which vitally concern the study.

In some cases, it is a particular individual who should be visited due to his influence or importance in the given community. In many areas of Colombia, this person would be the local parish priest. Cases have been known where the priest, referring to a research group, has told his congregation in his Sunday sermons that "a group of Communists are visiting the area asking suspicious questions" and that believers should in no way cooperate with these people. Such an introduction could well ruin the entire research study in that area and even create a dangerous situation.

At any rate, due importance should always be given to Latin sensitivity and concepts of hierarchy and formality. More often than not, local officials and other important local individuals will feel somewhat slighted and insulted if a research team comes into their area without bothering to talk with them, and, as a result, may create an unfavorable atmosphere or refuse future cooperation if such be needed. On the other hand, if they are visited at an early stage and the project given a reasonable explanation (which does not necessarily have to include all details), then they will generally be very cooperative and friendly and seldom will suggest even the smallest change in the questionnaire or study.

D. Choosing the sample to be interviewed

There are, of course, certain recognized methods of selecting the people to be interviewed. If, however, the person directing the interview has no academic background or experience in so doing, then the only thing to do is to request the assistance of someone with experience in the field. That was the procedure followed in my case.

Since the only available lists of people within the area were those of the irrigation districts and these only pertained to people using irrigation while the study covered people who didn't use irrigation as well, I originally decided to pick the sample by geographic zones. I did this by obtaining maps of the area covered by the two irrigation districts, dividing these into squares, numbering each square, and picking numbers by chance to determine the areas within which everyone would be interviewed. In this way I tried to obtain a representative cross-sample of both irrigators and non-irrigators, aiming at about 50 to 60 complete interviews.

Unfortunately, this did not work out as well as hoped. Some of the "squares" selected had few or no people living within them. In another instance, I began taking interviews of people living alongside a road which traversed one of the selected "squares." These people appeared to be individual producers, but as they were questioned, they turned out to be instead farm-laborers or "jornaleros" of a huge farm (over 2000 has.) which covered not only the selected square but several adjoining squares as well. Thus, a great deal of time was spent within this square, with a total result of only one interview (as the interview only applied to producers).

In other squares, none or few of the people questioned irrigated because there weren't any canals sufficiently close to their lands. This threatened to give a disproportionate number of non-irrigators to the sample, while the study was more concerned with interviewing producers who did in fact irrigate. Another problem was that this method did not provide the names of the producers, which made it more difficult to locate people. (Also, taking an interview is made much easier if the subject can be addressed by his name from the beginning.)

Consequently, the geographic method of selecting the sample was abandoned and the district's list of irrigators was utilized to select the remaining people to be interviewed. The fact that this list did not contain names of non-irrigators was no longer of consideration, as a sufficient number of these had already been interviewed. The names to be interviewed from this list were also chosen at random.

E. Difficulties in finding people whose names were chosen

Although the study was successfully completed following the second method, the problem of trying to find the people to be interviewed again proved to be a time consuming task, particularly during the first few days.

For one thing, the lists did not provide any addresses, nor did the districts have any other records indicating where these people could be reached. As a consequence, recourse had to be made to various employees of the districts, such as the water inspectors and ditch riders, who knew where the farms of these people were located, and, in some cases, other places where these people could be located.

However, this did not entirely resolve the problem of locating the people to be interviewed. Many of the people selected did not live at the farm but rather in nearby towns, or sometimes as far away as Bogotá, and would only show up at the farm on quick inspection visits. Others would visit the farm more regularly, but it was always difficult to locate them. (It should be noted that much of this absenteeism is due to the increasing number of kidnappings taking place in Colombia.)

Even those who lived at the farms, particularly if they were fairly large producers, were very difficult to locate, because they traveled almost daily to the towns and could generally be found at the farm only late at night or when they were too busy to be interviewed. Small producers, on the other hand, were usually at the farm all day and were easy to locate and interview.

To make the point clear, on the worst day, the interview team spent 12 hours and traveled over 300 kilometers trying to locate several people at their respective farms, and managed to complete exactly one interview.

In some cases the problem was solved by interviewing the administrators of the farms, but this also presented its problems as these people are often too busy to be interviewed. (In this case, the interviews were being taken during February and March, the crop-planting season, which is the time the administrators spend all day in different parts of the large farms they administer and are rarely at the central compound.) Also, administrators are sometimes reluctant to provide information they feel only the owner or producer should give.

Not much difficulty was experienced in interviewing those producers who also operated a separate business. They could always be found at their drug-stores, gas stations and the like. Others were reached at their homes, usually right after dinner time.

There still remained a hard-core of peripatetic people who couldn't be found either at home or at their farms. This problem was finally resolved when, by observation and through the advice of some people who sympathized with our problems, the places these farmers frequented at the various towns were located, interviewers were stationed therein at strategic times, "informers" would point out or introduce a person whose name appeared in the list, and then, over a cup of coffee or a beer, the unwary farmer would be interviewed. In this manner we were able to successfully conclude our remaining interviews.

These strategic locales included the offices of the Rice Growers' Association and of the Cotton Development Institute at Espinal and Saldaña (generally frequented during the late morning and early afternoon); a general store and bar in Saldaña (noon hour, before lunch); two cafés in Espinal, one of which was for Tolimenses and the other for Huilenses, both immensely popular at any time of the day; and the lobby of the hotel at the town of Guamo, where a few rice growers would wander in around cocktail hour.

In this last stage of interview taking, invaluable help was received through cultivating friendships with employees and secretaries at the Rice and Cotton Associations, as well as with the habitués of the various cafés and bars. Without their active participation, it would have been impossible to locate many of the names on our list.

F. Overcoming the suspicion on reluctance of the people to be interviewed

Quite often, particularly among the smaller farmers, requests to take interviews were met with suspicion. "Are you here to assess us with higher property taxes?" was a question we usually had to contend with. The larger landholders, on the other hand, were more concerned with our being from INCORA, the Colombian land reform agency. Thus, it was generally necessary to go through an elaborate explanation that we were in no way connected with any government agency but that rather we were conducting this study for the National University at Bogotá. Identifying oneself as a graduate student working on his thesis sometimes worked wonders.

In certain cases, people were encountered who had recently been interviewed by other groups or agencies (INCORA, Ministry of Agriculture, the National Apprenticeship Schools /SENA/, etc.), and who naturally expressed concern over "wasting more of his time on these interviews." In such cases, it was necessary to explain the different nature of our interview and to conduct it as rapidly as possible.

While the smaller farmers expressed their suspicions and concern more openly than their more opulent brethren, their confidence was also more easily gained once they were satisfied that our purposes were forthright. In fact, having lost their fear, they became most loquacious and would begin to talk and complain about everything imaginable, particularly INCORA, the problem then becoming one of keeping them from straying too far from the subject of the interview.

On the other hand, the larger producers, while ostensibly more cordial and easier to talk to, particularly at the beginning stages, would generally maintain a certain reserve throughout the entire interview and would hedge on certain data, especially if it referred to size of farms, expenses, and other economic data.

G. Other useful interviewing techniques or pointers

During the course of interview taking, there are many small techniques or actions which, if practiced, will generally facilitate this task. Most of these are quite obvious, but yet it may be useful to enumerate them.

1. Always be informal with the subject and act as if you felt at home, no matter how unpleasant the surroundings. Be a little chatty at first. Always treat the people with dignity, don't look down at them.
2. Carry cigarettes, offer some at an early stage, and leave the pack out for further smokes. This does wonders in establishing friendly relations.
3. Never lecture the subject, but rather always sympathize with his problems, no matter how much you are in disagreement.
4. Try to answer all their questions as best you can. You will find that you will be asked about many things unrelated to the interview, such as land reform, credit, agricultural practices, etc. to which you will have to provide some sort of general and short answer.
5. Be ready to do little favors, such as driving people down to the nearest town, treating for a beer, etc. In other words, things that will establish you in the community as a friendly and accessible person. Do not, however, give money or promise any results from your interview.
6. When necessary, accept offers of food or drink and hope for the best. People in general will feel slighted if you don't accept, and in any case, it will generally consist of a harmless "tinto" (cup of coffee).
7. If you are experiencing problems locating farms, for a few pesos a boy will act as your guide for the entire day.
8. Unless you have a fair command of Spanish, don't try to take interviews yourself.
9. Explain your questionnaire and its purposes carefully to your hired interviewers before sending them out in the field.
10. Keep a close watch on your hired interviewers. In my case, most were extremely responsible and did things on their own. But there are always cases of interviewers who will just sit around if they can't find the initial person assigned them rather than look for another one.
11. It is important to periodically review the work done by your hired interviewers. This will enable you to correct mistakes, work out problems, eliminate or change difficult questions, etc. It will also show them you are on your toes.

H. Other hints on doing field work

1. Take your own tissue paper. In some places it will either be unavailable or resemble sandpaper.
2. Have some rudimentary medicine available, such as aspirins, alka-seltzer, and particularly, anti-diarrhea pills such as mexoform or entero-vioformo.
3. Avoid drinking water; stick to soda-pop and beer.
4. Be provided with certain equipment, such as boots, a hat, and a penknife. At times, a hammock and a ruana will be most useful.
5. Be sure to eat a hearty breakfast--you never know when your next meal will come.
6. If driving a vehicle, carry an extra can of gas.
7. Don't expect to find the comforts of home; in most cases hotel facilities will not be adequate. Learn the joys of cold-water showering and shaving.
8. Be prepared for unusual occurrences, such as driving a groaning nine-month pregnant woman on your jeep at breakneck speeds over a bumpy road to the nearest hospital 50 kilometers away, all the while wishing you had read a manual on delivering babies (a personal experience).
9. Learn to like to what an American taste may be exotic foods, such as arepas, mazamorra, brains, cow udders, refajo (1/2 beer + 1/2 soda pop), etc.
10. Enjoy your work; consider it an adventure.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that directing and conducting a complete field-research project is a much more complicated task than one would at first imagine. It requires the skills of an organized thinker, a good writer, a psychologist, a map reader, a linguist, a public relations man, and a politician. It entails organization, being personable, a willingness to walk, resistance to inclement weather, a non-squeamish stomach, perseverance, and above all, much patience.

But it is also one of the most rewarding and educational experiences a person can have. There is no better way to get to know a country, its people, customs, and problems. And these rewards far overshadow all of the diverse problems and discomforts one must encounter.

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