

Full Length Research Paper

Using public participation to identify socio-economic classes and determine indicators of wealth in rural areas

Claudio O. Delang

Department of Geography and Resource Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, E-mail:
cdelang@cuhk.edu.hk.

Accepted 19 October, 2009

Determining the socio-economic classes of rural inhabitants is often very difficult because of various factors related to the lack of access to reliable data. This paper describes the process of identification of socio-economic classes in a small rural village in northern Lao PDR, with the help of the local inhabitants. The paper also describes the items used by the local inhabitants to determine villagers' membership in each socio-economic class.

Key words: Indicators of wealth, socio-economic classes, Lao PDR.

INTRODUCTION

Identifying socio-economic classes among rural populations is often difficult (Carter and May, 1999). The researcher may not have access to official statistics, and even when they are available, these statistics are not necessarily reliable for a variety of reasons (Bulmer, 1999). First, they may have been poorly collected and the result of a rash filling of a form, perhaps by a school child (Hill, 1984). Second, they may be out of date if they have been collected several years earlier in a rapidly changing rural area (Okafor, 1985). Third, they may not reflect all incomes available to a household but only include these items that the household - or the local civil servant who collected the information - wants the authorities to know (Naidu, 1983).

In the absence of official data, researchers often focus on some indicators of wealth, such as the number of cattle or buffalos, the conditions or size of the subjects' house, or the ownership of agricultural machineries. However, there are as many problems with these indicators as with official statistics. For example, an old house may not necessarily reflect the poverty of the household, since a household might save for several years to build a better house, and during these years it may not invest in the upkeep of the old house. Thus, a very old and decrepit house may be replaced with a new, large, and better-looking one shortly after the observer declared this household as being "very poor". Similarly counting cattle and buffalos may be unsatisfactory, since these animals are sold when large amounts of money are needed. Thus,

a farmer who decides to become a trader and sells his animals to buy a car would be considered poor if the researcher travels to the field between the time the animals are sold and the car is bought. The ownership of agricultural machinery may also be a poor indicator, since one may buy the machinery only after reaching an understanding with relatives and neighbours that they will rent the machinery from him/her, thus contributing to its cost.

Hence, the choice of the indicator is entirely arbitrary and subjective, and may not necessarily reflect what the local population themselves consider important (Suryanarayana, 2000). Why should the amount of cattle or the size of the house be indicators of wealth, rather than the number of children (or wives) the educational achievement of the children, or other unquantifiable social indicators, such as the number of people in one's social network or the influence that one has in the decisions made by the community? Every society or social group might have different indicators of wealth that are not known to the researchers and this makes it very difficult to organise the people into meaningful socio-economic classes.

This short paper addresses the problem of identifying suitable indicators of wealth in rural communities, and determining which economic classes the local people belong to. The method employed here is based on the premises that the local population know; 1) What characteristics - or the ownership of which items - differentiate a rich and a poor person, and 2) who in the

Table 1. Initial division of people in socio-economic classes

Socio-economic class	1	2	3	4	5	6
No. of people	2	21	45	37	42	4

Table 2. Second division of people in socio-economic classes

Socio-economic class	1	2	3	3.5	4	4.5	5	5.5	6
No. of people	2	21	30	15	24	13	16	26	4

community fulfills these characteristics or owns these items. Both premises are likely to be valid in most rural communities.

The following pages describe a survey carried out to address the difficulties in determining individual membership of socio-economic classes in rural communities. This survey was carried out as part of a research whose ultimate goal was that of looking at the differing economic choices, in terms of agricultural production and use of forest products, of the members of different socio-economic groups. To do this, I first needed to classify the people into socio-economic groups.

The present approach is motivated by my dissatisfaction with the usual approach of using observation or official statistics, which I believe are usually misleading, as well as my desire to find out which items or goods the people themselves consider when determining membership of socio-economic classes. I hope that this approach may give researchers and NGO workers some ideas when they need to carry out similar surveys in places they are relatively unfamiliar with. The present research was carried out in a rural village in northern Lao PDR, with 151 households. The survey was done with the help of a local Lao interpreter, specially trained for the purpose, in the summer of 2008.

METHOD AND RESULTS

The names of all inhabitants were written on small pieces of paper. Upon our request, a village meeting was called by the village head, where most inhabitants came. The inhabitants were explained the purpose of our exercise, and were asked to classify all villagers within five different groups of wealth, from 1 to 5 (1 being the richest and 5 being the poorest). Most villagers were not interested in the exercise, and slowly sneaked out of the meeting hall. About ten villagers remained and completed the exercise, with five enthusiastically taking part in the exercise, and another five sporadically helping with comments.

The initial selection of the villagers included a skewed classification towards the mean, with a few categories including a very large number of people (Table 1). While people found it easy to separate the very rich and the very poor from the "middle classes", they found it more difficult to further separate the "middle classes".

Because each middle class category contained too many people for the purpose of our research, we asked the respondents to

separate categories 3, 4 and 5 into two different categories each (adding categories 3.5, 4.5 and 5.5) to make the different categories more uniform in terms of number of people, and thus more amenable to our intended research on the use of forest products and agricultural choices by each socio-economic class. We therefore ended up with nine groups (Table 2). This classification was satisfactory, since we could reorganise these nine groups into the five groups (Table 3) that we were initially interested in, with a relatively uniform number of people, from 23 to 39 people in each category. Asking the respondents to further split large groups would help create classes with a more uniform number of people, if needed.

The choice of the items considered important, and determining the membership to each socio-economic class is quite interesting. The respondents were obviously not told which items they should include, but were given the freedom to choose themselves. The following items are those that the subjects considered important when determining membership of the different socio-economic classes:

Richest individuals

- Large gardens to grow vegetables for personal consumption
- More than 3 hectares of wet rice fields
- Enough rice for consumption and to sell a surplus
- Buffaloes/ cattle (over 20)
- A tractor
- Machine for harvesting rice
- Machine for husking rice
- A good house
- Can sell wood
- Eagle wood for sale
- Rubber trees
- Fish ponds (sufficient to sell some fish)

This category only includes a few individuals, who were actually reluctant to be included in the category, and rejected the idea of being rich.

Middle class individuals

- Sometimes enough rice to eat
- No tractor
- No husking machine
- Enough money to buy something for the house/personal consumption

This category includes by far the greatest majority of the people, as is understandable if one considers the vagueness of the items listed.

Table 3. Final division of people in socio-economic classes

Socio-economic class	1, 2	3	3.5, 4	4.5, 5	5.5, 6
No. of people	23	30	39	29	30

Poorest individuals

- Not enough rice
- No land
- A very small house made of bamboo
- Grass roof

The poorest individuals were those who were too old to work and who did not have children who could provide for them.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

This exercise proves that local populations have the ability to classify themselves into different socio-economic classes, and that they have their own systems of classification that may be unique. The villagers in this case study do use commonly used indicators of wealth (such as the amount of rice produced, cattle or buffalo ownership, the conditions of a house, or the ownership of agricultural machinery), which shows that these indicators would be of some use in this particular case. However, other indicators that the villagers use to identify the better off (such as large gardens to grow vegetables for personal consumption, fish ponds, or the ability to sell wood) are not usually used by NGO workers or researchers. Furthermore, if one uses these indicators of wealth it is very likely that only a few households would stand out as particularly rich or particularly poor (categories one and six here), and the bulk of the population (in this case 96 percent of the total) would be included into a "middle class" category that is difficult to split further, because rather homogeneous. Some research or development work might indeed need to split the local population into smaller socio-economic groups, and this can probably only be done using a process similar to the one described here.

To test the universality of these indicators of wealth, we carried out a similar survey in another village approximately three hours walk from the one in which this exercise was carried out, where most people live in houses made of bamboo, with a roof of bamboo or grass. Unlike in this village, where a house made of bamboo is an indicator of poverty, in that village this was not a determining factor (the results of that survey have been lost and are not shown here).

The difference between these two villages shows the difficulty in using "standard", or "objective" indicators of wealth. If one used in the second village the indicators used by the villagers in the first village, all people in the second village would be considered poor, while the villagers themselves do not necessarily agree with. This difference in opinion might be important when determin-

ing in which villages or among which household to carry out development work.

A researcher who travelled to the area for a short period of time would have enormous difficulties classifying the local inhabitants in a way that is meaningful, both to the local populations and to the research he or she is carrying out. Differences between villages, in terms of the values and expectations of the villagers, would obviously be quite difficult to ascertain by researchers that are not familiar with the area. Yet, they are essential to carry out meaningful research or development work.

Comparing the results of this village to those carried of the other village also goes a long way towards showing how increased incomes, and increased standards of living, changes the expectations of people. Economic growth may also change the class structure in the village in a very short time. In particular, if most villagers become wealthier, those who do not become wealthier drop from "rich" to "middle class", or from "middle class" to "poor".

The ambiguity of the items used to classify the people in the middle class category, and the very large number of people in the middle categories in Table 1 (categories 3, 4 and 5 in particular) also shows how difficult it is for the people to make a distinction between the members of the middle class. Since the difference in wealth is not very important in most rural villages, it is very difficult for the inhabitants to distinguish those individual who have a little bit more from those who have a little bit less. This shows again the relative lack of distinct socio-economic classes in rural communities (and the difficulties for the researcher or NGO worker to identify the members of these classes), where only a few individual can be said to stand out from the masses either by having much more or by having much less than the majority.

I hope that this Short Communication can give useful ideas to researchers who need to organize rural communities in socio-economic classes. There is a surprising lack of publications on this important issue, and future communications of alternative methods employed or indeed improvements of the present method would certainly be helpful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my research assistant, Ms. Lamphay Inthakoun, for her invaluable help in the field, as well as the people we interviewed for their availability, kindness and friendship, and two anonymous referees for their comments. All remaining mistakes are mine alone. The work described in this paper was fully supported by a

grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project no. CUHK442707).

REFERENCES

- Bulmer M (1999). Why don't sociologists make more use of official statistics? In M. Bulmer (Ed.) *Sociolog Res Methods*. New York: Transaction Publishers, Ch. 7: 131-152
- Carter MR, May J (1999). Poverty, livelihood and class in rural South Africa *World Development* 27(1): 1-20
- Hill P (1984). The Poor Quality of Official Socio-Economic Statistics Relating to the Rural Tropical World: Special Reference to South India. *Modern Asian Stud.* 18(3): 491-514
- Naidu VC (1983). National sample surveys data on household consumer expenditure: a critique. Madras: Madras Institute of Development Studies, working paper No. 43
- Okafor FC (1985). Measuring rural development in Nigeria: The place of social indicators. *Soc. Indic. Res.* 16(1): 69-76
- Suryanarayana MH (2000). How Real Is the Secular Decline in Rural Poverty? *Econ. Pol. Wkly* 35(25): 2129-2140