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The Pertinence and Value of Village Studies for the Analysis of Rural Employment and Unemployment

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ABSTRACT

THE PERTINENCE AND VALUE OF VILLAGE STUDIES FOR THE ANALYSIS OF RURAL EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT

This paper will focus on the possible contribution that village studies can make towards a meaningful analysis of rural employment and unemployment. Rural household production systems are generally characterized by complex patterns of labour use — "occupational multiplicity" and highly flexible divisions of labour among household members. In this paper, it is argued that such complex patterns cannot fully be grasped by doing questionnaire surveys only, as most of the data sought are embedded in intra-village relations which are governed by social, economic, and political forces that shape behaviour. Village respondents are reluctant to divulge sensitive information such as household income and yields from their land holdings. On the other hand, difficulties in understanding researchers' questions may cause villagers to give inaccurate information. In this paper, it is suggested that village studies as fact-finding and hypotheses testing exercises, could provide (1) sufficient amount of information about the village environment where intra-village relations operate, and (2) adequate insights into complex phenomena such as work duration, age of working population and underemployment. Such information and insights supplement the findings of sample questionnaire surveys.

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Introduction

The understanding of social processes is essential for planning economic growth in developing countries. As Myrdal has emphasised, "the non-economic factors, broad attitudes, institution and productivity consequences of very low levels of living, are of such paramount importance in under-developed countries that they cannot be abstracted from in economic theory and in planning" (1971 : 30).

The planning of economic growth and the construction of development models are still generally regarded as the preserve of economists' who pay little attention to the important role of non-economic (social, political and ecological) variables in development. In formulating development policies, they often look for national and regional-level data which are measurable and facilitate broad generalizations. Such data are usually collected with the help of large-scale sample surveys which present result in aggregated forms. According to policy planners, there are two main reasons for the use of such data : they cover a wide geographical area showing the main trends, with a sufficient amount of accurate data and there is an urgent need collecting basic data for policy planning at the national level at a low cost and within a short time-frame.

Despite these advantages, both policy makers and researchers have highlighted several difficulties in using such data for planning activities and for understanding such complex phenomena as employment, unemployment and rural income levels. It has been pointed out by researchers that in developing countries, the inherent characteristics of villages such as seasonality in economic activities, overlapping of the production unit with the consumption unit at the family farm level, and the role of various social institutions in determining individual behaviour cannot be adequately grasped through singleshoot sample surveys using questionnaires. The findings of such surveys often lead to various fanciful assumptions about people's behaviour as they often ignore complex interactions of economic, social and political forces which affect the behaviour of rural people. As a result, there is still a vast gap in our understanding of the various social and psychological variables which affect the success or failure of various rural development programmes.

In developing countries social institutions and peoples' attitudes are not tuned to the forces of economic growth unlike in developed countries where such phenomena are more frequently in harmony with development or at least, can easily be adjusted to it. Thus there is an urgent need for micro-level village studies to examine the interaction among social, economic, political and ecological variables at the village level. These should contribute to the understanding of the total village environment and how it influences villagers' behaviour, particularly their decisions with regard to time and labour utilization. But this is not to say that development planning should wait until social anthropologists and sociologists have done sufficient micro-level village studies to help develop more realistic growth models; rather, it means that development planners should try to learn as much as possible at the village level about the problems and difficulties of the people for whom they plan development.

This paper argues that a valid and possible way of improving the data, and the generalizations based on large-scale sample survey data, is to supplement them with the findings of micro village studies. Such studies could also be used to check the validity of macro-surveys and to generate further hypotheses for future studies.

Village Studies—Basic Concepts and Some Methodological Issues : Village and Village Environment

As all social scientists know it is almost impossible to define precisely the term 'village' as there is no single characteristic common to all villages. However, it is possible to identify several characteristics which recur and overlap in many villages, for example, small population size, nucleation, emphasis on agricultural occupations and production, and high, intensive interaction among the people.

In developing countries, especially in South Asia, the majority of the population live in villages. These villages are primarily agricultural; most villagers earn their living directly from cultivation activities, either producing the bulk of their own food or providing goods and services to the agriculturists. There are no full-time specialists in villages as every villager is expected to be a cultivator even if he is a physician or a witch doctor. Thus villagers, irrespective of their caste and land-holding position, engage in land cultivation for their living (Leach, 1971).

Although each village has certain distinct features which distinguish it from other villages, it is linked to the external world through various social, economic and political networks. In Sri Lanka, one very clear outcome of social change in rural areas is the increased rate of incorporation of hitherto inward-oriented villages into the national socio-economic system. Nevertheless, villages are important social units and will remain so for many years to come.

The main case for village studies in developing countries is the fact that the village environment is the major variable that affects the behaviour of villagers. "The village, in effect, though not usually in any constitutional sense, is a decision-making unit because its socio-economic and physical assets and liabilities and their inter-personal distribution, plus a degree of isolation, influence and are influenced by most decisions taken within the village" (Conell, 1977 : 14). In a village, there may be strong institutions such as *variga* ((sub-caste) which dictate who can own and cultivate land and how the villagers should interact with each other, for example, specifying the norms of reciprocity and mutual aid such as *attam*, *kaiya* and *nikang* help (Robinson, 1973). Thus the village environment imposes certain constraints on the villagers' behaviour. At least three such constraints can be identified : physical — quality, amount and suitability of its land for agricultural work; socio-economic — the nature of interaction among different groups of villagers, e.g., original villagers vs. outsiders and who controls resources; and external linkages — the presence or absence of certain institutions or facilities such as extension offices and food distribution centres which decide who should get what from the state agencies.

Village Studies : A Continuum

Village studies are conducted by scholars from different disciplines : social anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, political scientists, nutritionists, economists and specialists in village administration. Village studies can be categorised into four main types which may be placed in a

continuum, starting from anthropological village studies to 'studies in villages' which usually constitute a part of large-scale sample surveys. Between these two polar types of village studies, two other types can be identified: village surveys and 'survey in a village'. These four types differ in their relative emphasis on the need to carry out the inquiry within the boundaries of a given village. The village study proper as Epstein defines it is "any investigation which attempts focussing on the totality of a village social system, whose most or all of the research is conducted personally by a senior investigator, who collects and at least checks his data by means of participant observation and also analyzes it himself" (1978: 127). Random sampling is quite often absent in such a study as usually the entire population becomes respondents. The closest to village studies are village surveys as they may also cover the entire population of the village, or a part of it. In a village survey, group interviews are usually confined to heads of households or sometimes to a subset of households relevant to a particular sort of information required. The main difference between a village study and a village survey springs from this; the former is a fact-gathering exercise on all aspects of the village community, whereas the latter has a specific objective to investigate, for example, the impact of irrigation on employment opportunities. A 'survey in a village' is often a brief study of a certain aspect of the village, health or education, for instance, the data may be presented in tabular form, indicating averages. The study is usually located in one village and its objective may require data on the total village environment. 'Studies in villages' are often a part of a sample survey which covers a small sample from several villages. They take a few villagers from each village on a random basis and focus on their decision-making without showing much interest in the village environment and its constraints on individual behaviour. The last two types of village studies are closer to sample surveys than to village studies proper as the former shows scanty or no interest in the village environment. Such studies are of little value for comparative purposes and the villages are difficult to locate to verify the data or to restudy.

Despite these differences, all types of village studies have several practical advantages. If a researcher is going to stay in a particular village to make a full enumeration of the population or a sample survey on an issue or two, it is convenient for him to meet his respondents without moving around all the time. At the same time, if the researcher lives in a particular village for sometime, he can establish rapport with his respondents, thereby facilitating his fieldwork as the familiarity with the researcher encourages villagers to discuss their problems and needs more freely than with a researcher who comes to the village with a group of assistants to collect data in a single day. Villagers are scared and reluctant to give certain types of information and tend for instance, to understate their cultivation figures and income. Only prolonged familiarity with villagers can overcome such difficulties.

There are several aspects of village life that cannot be understood only through data collected by a questionnaire unless such data is supplemented by some qualitative observations, detailed unstructured interviews and study of village history. For example, production relations between landlords and their tenants cannot be understood fully unless the norms of reciprocity, patron-client relations and the importance of subsistence ethics in the realm of economic organization of the village are known. In such attempts to understand the deeper levels of interaction, surveys may evolve into village studies. On the other hand, as a result of living in a village, the researcher sometimes, may find more interesting aspects of village life that need probing and he may move into an altogether different field of study. Obeyesekere's *Land Tenure in Village Ceylon* is a good example of this transfer of interests. As Obeyesekere explained, "my original intention was to study religion in Madagama from a sociological and psychological point of view. Though I spent some time on this in the field, I was soon impressed by the importance of land tenure in the social structure of the village. Land was a major topic of village conversation" (1967: 3)

Village studies are necessary to collect certain types of data, for example, data on labour and time utilization patterns, employment and unemployment, especially in agrarian societies. Seasonal variations of demand for and supply of labour, difficulties in recalling facts due to short memories and lack of record/account-keeping in subsistence agricultural activities make such phenomena difficult to understand unless the researcher stays in the field for at least a full crop season, if not a year, to supplement his qualitative data with observations. This brings us to the main focus of the paper — the value and pertinence of village studies in the analysis of employment and unemployment.

Studies in Employment and Unemployment in Developing Countries

A major problem policy planners encounter in the study of labour utilization in developing countries is the selection of an appropriate conceptual framework for the collection and interpretation of labour force data. A number of conceptual and methodological approaches have been suggested which still have several drawbacks in understanding the conditions in rural areas within which unemployment and underemployment prevail. For example, the 'gainful worker' approach was found to be inadequate to measure the current activity ratios of individuals. The 'labour force' approach corrected this inadequacy but failed to grasp the complexities of partly traditional, partly modern villages in developing countries. Myrdal (1968) criticized the underlying assumptions of this approach — that the 'efficiency' aspect of labour is less important, idleness of labour is involuntary, and hence idleness as represented by unemployment and underemployment constitutes readily available labour supply — by showing that they deviate fundamentally from the socio-economic reality of developing countries. He further emphasized that a measure of labour supply should take into account both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the labour force. He maintained that it was necessary not only to count the number of gainfully employed workers, but also to study their actual productivity as the labour supply in a given community depends not only on the population of working age, but also on the actual number of hours worked and the extra time available for work.

Data on the qualitative aspects of employment and unemployment in agrarian societies cannot be collected through questionnaire surveys alone, as these often fail to provide reasons or a reasonable explanation, for example, as to why some workers do not accept certain jobs even when they are unemployed.

In order to capture such diverse and complex phenomena, it is necessary to place these activities in the context of the village environment. This environment constitutes the socio-economic and political system plus the physical character of the village. In such a context, definitions and models developed in modern, western countries which are primarily industrial, become inadequate, if not misleading, in understanding such phenomena as employment and unemployment. The village environment being the arena within which the majority of villagers interacts it is appropriate to attempt to understand labour utilization primarily as an aspect of intra-village socio-economic relations.

Labour Utilization As An Aspect Of Intra-Village Relations

Despite the radical changes which have taken place in rural areas, for example, their increasing incorporation into national socio-economic systems, many villagers still find most of their work locally. As several village studies have shown, the optimal inputs of time for each type of activity are determined by household size and structure, together with the characteristics of the farm.

Thus it is often misleading to separate the farm from the farm household. The rural household has two interrelated roles : (a) it unifies producer and consumer activities in the same unit, and (b) the household acts as a labour reserve with restrictions on labour inputs into actual agricultural work. These restrictions are often decided by cultural and social norms and by tradition. For example, the culture decides whether women should work in the family farm or concentrate on child minding and cooking, or give attention to both. In this context, a division of household activities into economically productive and non-productive categories is quite arbitrary as the two categories mutually facilitate a household's economic and social activities.

Many villagers work for themselves most of the time and exchange labour among themselves. In this context, the model of 'voluntarily' or 'involuntarily' unemployed at a given 'going wage' makes no sense. Such a model compels us to overlook or take for granted various pressures against work-seeking or work-accepting which research has revealed to be highly localised and flexible in the context of certain sorts of earning opportunity. Such pressures include kinship obligations, caste prohibitions and sheer lack of skills.

Data on labour utilization is notoriously difficult to collect and not very reliable unless gathered over a considerable period of time to cover the seasonal variations and fluctuations of labour opportunities, wages and food habits. This calls for the researcher to live in the village over a period of time as a participant observer in addition to being a gatherer of quantifiable data.

Researchers who have identified these difficulties have adopted two approaches to the study of labour utilization at the village level (Tilakaratne, 1980). They are the time-use survey approach and the 'labour efficiency' approach. Since time-use surveys do not begin with *a priori* judgements about what is and what is not economic activity, they enable the identification of complex patterns of labour utilization, within its socio-cultural context. The 'labour efficiency' approach was formulated by Myrdal, who defines the 'labour force' as the population of working age, where age limits are determined by realistic assumptions and related to the customs of the region. Given the levels of occupational distribution, natural resources, capital and technology, the extent of labour utilization is presented as the product of participation, duration and labour efficiency ratios.

Time-use surveys and the collection of data required for the calculation of different ratios of the 'labour efficiency' approach call for long-term fieldwork as data on demographic patterns, participation and durations cannot be collected through single-shot surveys. To collect such information, there is a need for accurate recording of quantitative data and perceptive observation of often subtle behaviour patterns.

Demographic data is often collected in sample surveys. However, such data often does not provide insights into the changes in the age and sex structure of the population nor household composition and structure. Quite often age data is difficult to collect, especially from illiterate villagers who do not have written documents to confirm their statements. In these cases, a thorough knowledge of the histories of the village may provide benchmark events against which a person's age, for instance, can be ascertained. Such information is necessary for understanding the potential workforce size. Furthermore, data on seasonal migration, the number of villagers who have migrated to other villages permanently and the volume and pattern of their remittances are essential to estimate a family's need, to work, and its working capacity. Such data cannot be obtained by a research assistant with a questionnaire in half a day, but needs committed interest in probing and linking quantitative data to qualitative information to build up a complete picture of the labour force.

Participation rates are usually estimated for duration and occupation distribution by using sample survey data. These estimates quite often exclude the work input of women and children. In addition, participation is not a continuous exercise and estimates on participation are of little value unless they indicate the duration and type of participation. Participation data also makes little sense unless it is explained in the socio-economic context of the village environment, and this is possible only through prolonged studies carried out by resident researchers.

Information on the duration of work is also of little use as a guide to labour utilization unless there is good parallel data on participation and on the activities involved. On the other hand, the collection of data on the duration of labour input is very difficult unless time and labour use records are kept over a long period by the researcher. Such records make it possible to explain intra-village differences in family labour utilization patterns. To explain why labour duration varies among farm families, one has to assess the quality, as well as the amount, of the land area a family operates. Its soil type, liability to flooding, etc., should be recorded. Measurements of land which is uncultivated or only occasionally cultivated should be collected with a view to seeing if the land could be brought into cultivation and then operated at a profit. The location of each farm family's parcels of land, their ownership status and the activities for which the land is used may have important implications for labour productivity, travel time, share cropping, etc.

The complexity of rural data is aggravated by human biases and beliefs which are difficult to handle without establishing a good relationship with the respondents. Information on rural credit, land tenure, encroachments, share cropping rates and income is often difficult to collect as villagers do not usually trust outsiders who come with questionnaires to interview them. For example, it was difficult to collect income data in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as villagers thought that such data would eventually be used to deprive them of their rice ration books (Perera, 1985). Similarly the rural poor are reluctant to provide information on their economic transactions with landlords and on *ande* tenancy rates for fear of eviction. As a result the information obtained through sample surveys is often unreliable. Only long familiarity with the village community can overcome these difficulties.

Another problem with information on rural income, expenditure, savings and output from agricultural activities is that this information is normally not conceptualized by rural people. "It is generally accepted that, for example, LDC (less developed countries) national income and sample survey data grossly underestimate rural savings, perhaps by a factor of three or four. This is not mainly because such estimates seek unduly sensitive information, but because the inquirer wants to know things that the respondent has had no good reason to think about. The bulk of rural saving is non-monetised — construction and repair of dwellings by farm families, diversion of time from production (or leisure) to canal, well or temple construction or maintenance. Such forms of 'embodied time', and their value and opportunity cost become clear to the inquirer only after considerable observation of the community" (Lipton, 1978:20 & 21).

Epstein (1973), in her study of levels of living, income and employment in South India, has emphasised the need for prolonged and sympathetic understanding of the whole or part of the population of a community, if the researcher expects to get the diverse and complex picture of the economic conditions of rural people. She has pointed out the difficulties she encountered in accepting the findings of macro-surveys: "Economists usually rely for their analysis on macro-surveys, as India's National Sample Survey does; these lend themselves to statistical processing but can be subject to considerable error. The study of particular cases represents a much more modest approach than

working with averages for large groups of people or whole population. At the same time, if the cases examined can be shown to be typical of a larger section of the population, they can throw light on aspects of development which are hidden by statistical treatment of data. This makes for a much more lively appreciation of development problems than mere quantitative analysis where individuals become engulfed in averages" (Epstein, 1973:143).

Tilakaratne (1980) who studied a wet zone village in depth showed convincingly that the common assumption that a peasant's daily work pattern is dominated and controlled mainly by subsistence (rice) cultivation and hence that he is active only during peak seasons is rather erroneous and incomplete. Using time-use survey data, he showed that a small farmer's daily work pattern was not entirely determined by seasonal variations in cultivation work. Rather, a small farmer engages himself in a variety of seasonal activities such as animal husbandry, toddy-tapping and casual wage labour in addition to the cultivation of his land. Tilakaratne found that a farmer worked at least six hours a day for almost seven days a week. During peak seasons in paddy cultivation he worked longer hours. Tilakaratne concluded that underutilization of labour in the peasant sector was "neither a situation of low participation nor seasonal idleness, but a perpetuation of low returns to labour."

In a recent survey carried out by the author and Tilakaratne on rural landlessness in Sri Lanka, a similar approach was adopted to understand labour-use patterns among landless households. Time-use records were kept with the help of resident research assistants for a period of 10 months covering both wet (*maha*) and dry (*yala*) cultivation seasons (from November 1986 to August 1987) in eight villages.¹ A sample of 32 households from each village was chosen and the summary of findings is given in p. 12 for a wet zone village (Pahinipaddara) and a dry zone village (Kirindiwatte).

The table demonstrates several important facts about rural labour use which may have gone unnoticed in a single-shot questionnaire survey. The first is that in the wet zone and the dry zone villages, both men and women work more or less the same number of hours a week. The second is that although all sample households are identified as "landless", they spend less than 50% of their directly productive time as wage labourers. Their hired labour time constitutes less than 20% of their total work hours. If the researchers had taken only the directly productive work as indicative of employment (as many large-scale sample surveys do), except for the men of Kirindiwatta, all categories would have been labelled as underemployed. Such a conclusion overlooks the fact that 'indirectly productive work' often facilitates 'directly productive work.' Our in-depth knowledge of the village environment of Pahinipaddara tells us that 25 married and 15 unmarried women have gone to Middle East countries as housemaids. The men in their families mind the children and do household work in the absence of the women facilitating the latter's employment.

Time-use surveys have distinct advantages. They provide precise measurements of how households allocate their time among various activities. Moreover, they enable the identification of complex patterns of labour use in their total socio-cultural context. Since this method allows the inquirer to look at time and labour use in their totality, it is possible to minimize the danger of arriving at conclusions such as that villagers are underemployed or are not doing economically

1. Four villages were chosen from the wet zone and four from the dry zone, assuming that ecological differences affect time and labour use among villagers.

NUMBER OF HOURS PER WEEK SPENT ON ACTIVITIES BY THE LANDLESS
HOUSEHOLDS — PAHINIPADDARA AND KIRINDIWATTA : 20 - 59 AGE GROUP

	<i>No. of hours worked per week</i>			
	<i>Pahinipaddara</i>		<i>Kirindiwatta</i>	
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
1. Paddy cultivation	0.28	0.01	7.00	2.26
2. Highland cultivation	1.61	0.66	4.40	2.97
3. Chena cultivation	0.07	—	5.80	6.02
4. Attam work	0.10	0.02	0.30	0.32
5. Animal husbandry	1.06	0.62	1.30	0.23
6. Trade & transport	0.21	0.04	0.06	—
7. Petty trade (within the village)	2.65	1.52	0.20	0.10
8. Hired labour	12.02	7.03	10.00	10.68
9. Self-employment	3.44	0.25	3.90	0.58
10. Salaried jobs	3.69	1.37	4.00	—
11. Cottage industry	0.04	0.69	0.03	2.06
12. Household work	14.04	29.58	1.10	22.36
13. Child-minding	1.86	2.20	0.80	2.21
14. Visiting physicians	0.91	1.18	0.30	0.42
15. Marketing	3.77	2.11	4.60	0.60
16. Social work	2.83	1.65	0.70	0.42
17. Other	17.25	14.45	3.90	0.44
1 - 11 (directly productive work)	24.84	12.23	37.20	25.28
12 - 17 (indirectly productive work)	40.27	53.39	11.50	28.05
Total	<u>65.11</u>	<u>65.62</u>	<u>48.70</u>	<u>53.33</u>
Directly productive work	38.15%	18.64%	76.39%	47.40%
Indirectly productive work	61.85%	81.36%	23.61%	52.60%

productive work or, simply, that they are lazy. In this regard, the inseparable link between the family as a production unit and the family as a consumption unit is relevant. Another advantage of labour and time use surveys is that the data on how people actually allocate their time among various activities may inform those introducing new technology and innovations, about who will benefit, whose labour will be displaced, etc.

The main difficulty of time-use surveys is a practical one — that of obtaining the villagers' co-operation over a long time. But this can be overcome in a village study when the researcher is a resident observer of daily events who has established a good relationship with his informants.

Conclusion

Village studies cost time, money, effort and skilled manpower. They are therefore inappropriate for obtaining data when (i) the affected persons do not live in the village, for example, migrants, (ii) the information wanted is non-sensitive, easily recalled and obvious enough to be obtained rapidly and reliably by simple observation or questions, and (iii) the aim is to obtain general 'average' data (Connel, 1977:16).

However, rural employment and unemployment data, being embedded in intra-village relations, is complex and diverse. Therefore, it is necessary to supplement sample surveys on labour and time use in rural areas with intensive village studies. This would allow one to understand and identify the various forces that determine and constrain people's choices over how and when they use their labour.

Village studies can be divided into two main categories: fact-finding studies and problem-oriented studies. In analysing rural employment and unemployment, a researcher can obtain data from both types of studies; the former provides the basic facts of the community, while the latter provides information on trends in rural employment. However, both types of studies have quite often failed to fulfil their objectives as either they have not been carried out with a clear idea about how the data would be processed, analysed and presented or they have provided only a limited amount of information on labour use, occupational structure and participation rates. Such village studies are hardly useful for another reason; they normally do not give a clear statement on methodology. As a result, it is difficult to use such data to develop typologies for comparative studies on rural employment and unemployment.

Thus it is possible to make a strong case for systematic intensive village studies together with sample questionnaire surveys to understand the rural employment situation. Village studies if properly planned and carried out could help to discover the basic facts of the village environment. They could show the extent and the manner in which people convert their time and labour to produce food and provide services. Such data could also allow the researcher to test hypotheses about how the village environment facilitates or hinders their participation.

Systematic hypotheses-testing using village studies is long overdue. The author knows of only one village study in Sri Lanka that has attempted to test several hypotheses in the field of labour use (Tilakaratne, 1980). Village studies should be carried out in particular, to understand the effects of seasonal variations in labour availability and institutional constraints that may affect people's capacity to absorb new techniques and technology into their production systems.

Village studies can inform policy makers to what extent certain factors influence the employment situation in a given area. Such studies specifically will say, for example, that low incomes are due to short work duration as opposed to poor productivity, or to maldistribution as opposed to inadequacy of opportunities. Such information will assist in formulating rural labour and development policies.

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