

### **34. RAPing in Chad**

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**By Carol Watson**

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**The set of short synopses of completed, ongoing and planned UNICEF-supported studies described in this paper demonstrates a UNICEF programme of cooperation firmly committed to national research capacity building focused on high priority problems linked to child survival and development. This paper also provides an acute analysis of the organizational and professional constraints inherent in the introduction of a new qualitative methodology that requires a new way of viewing and working with communities. The succinct outline of problems, ranging from those with the donor, to those with government and with researchers complements the earlier paper by Murphy, from the World Bank. This paper, written from the perspective of a professional qualitative researcher and programme officer working for a major donor and living in a developing country, shows how quickly and how productively RAP can be introduced. However, researchers and donors alike are cautioned on important constraints that can be expected and overcome. - Eds.**

IN THE SEARCH for relevant information on which to base the UNICEF supported Analysis of the Situation of Women and Children in Chad, it soon became apparent that both qualitatively and quantitatively the gaps in the existing data base are enormous. There are no reliable demographic statistics, as the country has had no census since the 1960s. Studies of an ethnographic nature are mostly outdated, recent sociological research having been interrupted during the protracted period of civil unrest characterizing the country virtually since independence.

The studies that do exist tend to concentrate on certain regions rather than others, often favour certain themes of purely ethnographic interest, such as religion, and do not always focus specifically on women and children. More recent operational studies commissioned or performed by international agencies in conjunction with humanitarian aid or development actions are scattered and often narrowly focused on a particular problem; the results are not easily accessible and are often of uneven quality.

In addition, research capacity in the country is poorly developed. University structures are weak, with most academic facilities destroyed or disrupted during the war, and many of the most qualified personnel of all disciplines have fled the country. With very little background data, the question UNICEF faced in the course of its planning for 1990-1994 was how to build relevant programmes of action in favour of women and children.

#### **Operational research programme**

One of the responses was to develop an operational research programme designed to collect

relevant information on women and children's lives through support given over the next five years to local research institutions and individuals. The aim of the programme is two-fold: to contribute to the data base and to strengthen national capacity for research. With the Ministry of Plan as the coordinating ministry, contacts have been established with the University, the National Institute for Social Sciences (INSH), the Center for Applied Research (CRA), the Interministerial Office for Studies and Projects (BIEP), the Central Hospital of N'Djamena, and various ministerial departments, including the Center for Nutrition and Food Technology (CNNTA) of the Ministry of Health and the Division of Statistics of the Ministry of Plan.

**Projects begun in 1990 include the following:**

*An investigation of traditional practices adversely affecting the health of women and children*

In coordination with the National Committee on Traditional Practices, this study was led by a professor of law specializing in women and customary practices at the University of Chad, assisted by a lecturer in sociology at the National School of Public Health and Social Services. Field work began in 1990 in four regions of the country, seeking to establish a broad inventory of traditional practices, but focusing most specifically on excision. The aim was to identify those involved in the practice, examine causes and consequences, and investigate attitudes for and against the practice through questions asked a cross-section of the population, including male and female, the excised and the non-excised, traditional leaders, excisers, socio-sanitary personnel, political authorities, and others. The results of the study were intended to aid the National Committee on Traditional Practices in developing a programme of action focused on popular education and training.

*A study of the socio-economic aspects related to the return of refugees to Chad, with a focus on the situation of women and children*

As part of a larger, multi-country study programmed by the U.N. Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the study in Chad focused on five zones that have seen massive influxes of refugees returning after the period of hostilities. National policies and programmes are examined in the light of problems encountered by refugees on their return. A special case-study approach was taken with women. The aim was to document experiences in order to provide policy recommendations for national and international leaders.

*An investigation of girls' school attendance and dropout rates*

Statistical information drawn from school attendance records exists to indicate a major problem in girls' educational attainment in Chad. The aim of the study was to flesh out the statistics with qualitative insights into various cultural perceptions of, and reasons for, the situation. Investigators are drawn from the Ministry of Education. Field studies were sited in four regions of the country where the presence of UNICEF area-based service programmes provided scopes for eventual pilot programmes to enhance girls' educational opportunities based on the study's findings.

### ***Ethno-linguistic research into common childhood illnesses and traditional remedies***

Led by two linguists from the University of Chad working with key informants from two ethno-linguistic communities in the capital and selected resource people, the study aimed at recording popular perceptions of diseases through precise transcriptions of terminologies used to describe them, and to establish a comparative tri-lingual lexicon useful for health-workers operating in Chad's multi-cultural setting. Offshoots of the study so far include a video on certain traditional practices affecting children's health, such as removal of the luette, and a classification of medicinal plants and herbs from the region surrounding N'Djamena.

### ***A study of village-level economic resources and community priorities in a region in the south of Chad***

This project evolved as a response to difficulties encountered by UNICEF and National Water Office personnel when visits of prospection for provision of water services failed to elicit community support in areas where water was plentiful but of poor quality and water-borne diseases were prevalent. As government policy was to ask communities to participate financially (\$275) towards the cost of installing village pumps, the question was: "Was refusal to participate due to limited resources on the part of community members or to non-perception of the problem? The study begun in late 1990 coordinated by the Economic Research Unit of the University (BEC), with input from the Statistical Division of the Ministry of Plan.

#### **Other studies under consideration included:**

- An investigation of cultural preferences on the part of certain Muslim parents to school their daughters through the traditional Islamic system of "madrassa" rather than through the public school system.
- A study of fever cases at the Central Hospital of N'Djamena, which aims to combat the tendency to misdiagnose and therefore mistreat all fevers as symptomatic of malaria.

UNICEF also aided in an earlier study which was an evaluation of the impact of rural radio programmes in four representative areas of the country. The study was conducted by two Chadian sociologists.

All of the studies were led and conducted by Chadian nationals - a conscious choice having been made to avoid calling in outside "experts" in order to build up local-level expertise in research activities. UNICEF's contribution was financial, conceptual, managerial, and technical with participation in all phases of project design and implementation. It must, however, be added from personal experience that everyday office time pressures and multiple responsibilities constantly threaten to reduce the role of UNICEF staff to that of mere administrators.

## **Initial resistance to RAP**

While not all of these studies lend themselves in the same degree to all aspects of RAP methodology and approach, an attempt was made, through projection of the RAP video, discussion of RAP techniques, and participation in the development and testing of data-gathering instruments, to initiate the different research teams and participating UNICEF staff members into the spirit of RAP; i.e. to instill in the investigators an anthropological approach to information-gathering. There has been no assessment as to the extent to which the results reflect these efforts. The following comments are offered as observations on some of the difficulties encountered in the process.

### ***The quantitative/qualitative quandary***

For the most part, UNICEF staff members are charged with furnishing headquarters, with numbers, working with government officials most at ease with statistics, and with researchers most comfortable with neat tableaus of countable responses. RAP's emphasis on the need for qualitative assessments of situations was difficult to assimilate and left most participants uneasy. The solution, of course, is to offer RAP as an alternative approach, complementary to other statistical surveys. But when research funds are limited and other initiatives rare, it is difficult to insist on the importance of quality over quantity with persons conditioned to demand quantitative data.

### ***Depth or breadth?***

A related problem was resistance to basing an analysis on responses of a few members of various population groups interviewed in depth rather than on a broad survey of larger population samples. The question inevitably raised was, "Can talking with a few key informants at length give you as much to go on in pinpointing problems and planning programmes as covering entire communities with a questionnaire?"

### ***Problems with the particular***

In its focus on in-depth analysis of problems perceived by particular communities, the RAP methodology leaves many seeking to conceptualize and implement national programmes asking about its relevance to them. This is especially a problem in a multi-cultural setting such as Chad. The reaction of a UNICEF staff member and former Ministry of Health worker after viewing the RAP video was typical; shaking his head, he simply dismissed the possibility of RAP's being useful in his programming efforts with the government. What RAP might reveal about particular communities would most likely have little impact on national policy formation, so, some would ask, why do it?

### ***Dealing with diversity***

Bureaucratic problems particularly stemming from traditions of centralized planning leading to a heavy top-down approach to programming are often combined with political mistrust of

diversity. In a country like Chad the idea of highlighting cultural diversities and adapting national programmes to such differences is often politically unacceptable, though the idea of regional development is gradually gaining currency.

### ***Taking people seriously***

At the heart of the problem is perhaps the failure on the part of government bureaucrats and technicians, UNICEF project personnel, and researchers alike to take people's perceptions seriously. Within the framework of authoritarian political structures, there is not much scope nationally for people's views to filter up. Government technicians, therefore, cannot be expected to accept that as their mandate. With UNICEF staunchly allying itself to government structures, UNICEF personnel working day in and day out with their government counterparts also risk assimilating this point of view and often lack the language skills necessary to approach "the people" directly. Researchers themselves, with an uncertain role in these societies, may not only lack the skills necessary to elicit people's opinions, they may also lack the power to do so.

In a recent attempt, for example, to encourage local journalists to document the Chadian people's experiences as they move out of a situation of war, drought, and the collapse of the cotton market, the journalist charged with reporting on agricultural problems went to the Ministry of Agriculture to conduct interviews with officials rather than to the countryside to ask questions of peasants. He served as the mouthpiece of government rather than as spokesman for the people.

Another apparent obstacle seems to exist at the societal level. Researchers are usually drawn from the urban elite and connected with government ministries. They seem to see it as a loss of face to go into the countryside simply to ask questions and listen rather than to give directives and offer solutions. In an early phase of the education project, for example, the researcher spent almost as much time in haranguing parents for not sending their daughters to school as in listening to their reasons for not doing so.

### ***The fear of open-endedness***

Even if the principle of taking people seriously is accepted, the techniques used to elicit responses are not always appropriate. Sociological research practices in Chad are generally rigid, based on fill-in-the-blank and yes-no type questionnaires, with little attention to formulating the RAP-type more open-ended questions that might allow real human perceptions and responses to filter through. Researchers have rarely received training in asking such questions or in recording people's responses in their own words. Difficulties in treatment and analysis of the data are also a discouragement to such an approach.

### ***Formalistic frameworks***

A related problem is that, since most of the research in Chad is so formalistic, it is difficult convincing researchers that informal interviews with friends and chance encounters are as valuable as formal interviews in yielding qualitative data of the type desired. Nor will they easily accept the idea that material from their own lives may add depth to the analysis of material drawn from the lives of others, since most of the topics under investigation touch them closely as

members of the same societies. In the study of traditional practices, for example, the women researchers had similar experiences of female circumcision themselves or within their close families; yet they distanced the object of investigation as if truth were to be found in external objectivity and not in subjective experience.

### ***Integrating observations***

Related to the above are difficulties in linking observations to questionnaire responses in order to measure people's words against actions. On one occasion, a researcher interviewing a woman in her home recorded the response to the question of who took care of the household water supply as "the woman". Ten yards away in the courtyard, in full view of the interviewer, a young girl of about seven laboriously filled up a bucket from a deep well. This went unnoted by the researcher. The RAP approach stresses observation as well as open-ended questioning. On another occasion, in the investigation of the impact of rural radio, researchers carefully noted responses to questions concerning most popular listening times or possession of radios, but did not consider double-checking these responses with observations of times when people were actually listening to the radio or how many people in a particular village actually owned working radios. While, the rapidity of RAP might not allow room for the detailed and repeated observations that form the backbone of traditional anthropological fieldwork, even a little observation can go a long way. An underlying principle of RAP is "triangulation" - approach the same issue in several different ways.

### **Positive potential**

In spite of these preliminary obstacles, there are many positive signs that resistance to RAP is being overcome and that the potential for imbuing ongoing operational research with the anthropological spirit exists. A major component of the Operational Research programme over the next several years is the training of national personnel. By having project leaders available with a solid background and experience in RAP and other anthropologically-oriented research techniques, many of the original difficulties encountered may be avoided in the future.

Already, through the various works-in-progress, several advances have been noted, with sometimes unintended positive benefits. The different project research teams meet regularly to discuss methodology, debate approaches, hammer out research instruments, and analyse results. These productive encounters of government personnel, UNICEF staff, and researchers help break down some of the barriers that tend to exist among personnel with different functions. It is as if the common search for truth unites us. There is a natural tendency towards multi-disciplinarity within the teams, which are composed of lawyers, sociologists, linguists, teachers, botanists, economists, health workers, and bureaucrats of various kinds.

The multi-disciplinary exchange of ideas when we come together is a welcome relief from the more narrowly focused sectorial approach to problems that characterizes much of our programme work with government structures. The programme has allowed UNICEF to expand its collaboration in the country to include non-habitual partners such as the University. This can only enhance UNICEF's intellectual base as it moves into the 1990s offering ideas and knowledge in addition to vaccines and ORS.

Certain discoveries have been made by the researchers during their investigations that further break down their resistance to RAP. In the study of girls' education, for example, researchers had originally intended to interview teachers, parents, and administrative authorities and had scoffed at interviewing the girls about their education. When more or less forced to conduct focus-group discussions with young village girls, they found the girls actually quite animated and vocal in expressing opinions. A similar discovery was made by the investigators of traditional practices who encountered women quite willing and able to discuss intimate aspects of their lives.

Experimentation with multiple forms of interview techniques is proceeding apace; the instruments, for example, which the traditional practice teams are now using are a far cry from the rigid, non-varying fill-in-the-blank type questionnaires originally proposed. The importance of observation has been accepted: in the girls' education study, observation grids have been elaborated to guide and systematize observations of girls' and boys' behaviours and interaction with others in the home, public places, and schoolroom. These have been tested and found useful by all involved in the study.

That UNICEF is taking evaluation research seriously is demonstrated by the availability of funding for the creation of the programme just described. It must, however, be noted that the particular anthropological approach to research as exemplified by RAP has not yet been institutionalized and still seems to depend very much on the willingness of individuals within the system to push it through, often under rather adverse conditions. This points to the continuing importance of gatherings such as this conference, and the need to create more support systems as well as to develop abundant training materials for a variety of field settings.