

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER?

Using the focus group to make a qualitative assessment of a field experiment in rural development

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Acknowledgements

We are indebted to the UK's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the Gola Rainforest National Park Programme (until 2012 supported by the European Union, Fonds Française pour l'Environnement Mondial and the Global Conservation Fund at Conservation International), for their collaboration in this project. Research discussed in this publication has been funded by N.W.O. grant # 452-04-333, the Cambridge Humanities Research Grants Scheme, the Cambridge Conservation Initiative and the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation Inc. (3ie) (grant # TW1.1042) through the Global Development Network (GDN). The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the funders or its members. We acknowledge the loyalty and hard work of the team of field enumerators and the patience and cooperation of interviewees.

1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Development agencies are keen to assess impacts of project interventions. In many cases they are interested not only in whether an intervention did good in objective terms (e.g. whether an investment in clean water reduced infant deaths from gastro-intestinal diseases) but whether the intervention also had a discernible positive effect on the mentality and dispositions of the 'treated' population. Did a project, for example, build trust within and between communities, boosting capacity for cooperation and self-reliance, or conversely did it undermine resilience by creating a climate of suspicion over (say) unfair distributions or misappropriated resources? These second kinds of impacts are often especially important to agencies seeking to mobilize communities for purposes additional to poverty alleviation - when the overall agenda is conflict reduction or environmental protection, for example.

The first kind of intervention can often be assessed through direct measurements (clinic records or stool samples, for example). Effects can be judged by properly sampled baseline and endline data, or through a variety of other econometric techniques. But in the second case less tangible effects are of interest. A positively valued intervention might stimulate the majority to clamp down on free riders. A scheme that has been badly handled might generate damaging internal wrangling. In these circumstances agencies need to find ways of assessing not just objective impacts but also impacts on community morale and motivation.

The focus group is a valued tool in this regard, since it seems well suited to judging the response of a group to a proposed or experienced intervention. But questions can be raised about the output of focus groups. First of all it is far from obvious that statements made are always honest answers to unbiased questions. Interests within the group may have their own agenda for impression management. Group leaders might want to hide ways in which they have re-arranged an intervention so that it suits an interest different from that intended by the agency. Dissenting voices may be policed and stifled. Facilitators may also have an agenda of their own. They may be looking for certain tokens of assent to legitimate a policy decided in advance. Additionally, a meeting may develop its own dynamic momentum; emotional energy, for example, may overwhelm more calculated responses.

Thus there are good grounds for attempting to develop a more critical understanding of the output of focus groups when the 'evidence' they yield is applied to assessing project impacts. Here, we explore a setting in which a conservation agency sought to bring benefits to forest-edge communities as compensation for lost resources. The impact of these interventions had already been measured quantitatively through framed field experiments, in which villagers had chosen both the objective of the intervention and the modality for organizing the supply of resources. We then used focus groups as a way of assessing how different groups of villagers "read" the experiment in

which they had participated, and what they were prepared to say publicly about these interventions. The set up of the experiment and the focus group feed back allows us to make some inferences about the dynamics of development discourse in public meetings of this kind, and whether (as evaluators hope) such consultations do result in "truth speaking to power".

The work was carried out in cooperation with The Gola Rainforest National Park (GRNP), a conservation program in eastern Sierra Leone. GRNP is obligated to provide certain community improvements in return for local cooperation in maintaining forest reserve boundaries. The park management has a keen interest in finding out whether its development interventions do, indeed, build community support for Park objectives, and agreed to our suggestion that an experimental design, comparing the effectiveness of different packages chosen by villagers would generate useful information.

With the quantitative results of the experiment gathered, but not yet made known, a second research team then visited a sub-sample of villages to carry out a 'typical' endline set of focus group sessions, seeking assessments of villagers concerning the treatments for which they had opted. The aim was to then compare the output of the quantitative and qualitative studies. How would villagers report and interpret the choices they had made, and the effectiveness of the interventions in qualitative terms, when set against quantitative results? What might this comparison then tell us about the dynamics of local public discourse concerning development? Are focus group outputs a good guide to concrete and factual issues the project could address, or are they better understood as indicative of local mood and mentality in a long-running debate between land owners and political authority over issues of resource ownership and management? And to what extent do communities speak with a single voice, or splintered by competing interests of gender, age, and social status?

Sixteen communities were chosen for the present study, divided into four equal groups - villages each opting for one of three distribution modalities (see below), and a control group of adjacent villages outside the scheme with no treatments. In order to probe focus group internal effects we made two further analytical moves. We reduced questioning to a minimum, to avoid providing unwitting clues that could be read as a signal that the focus group team was part of the contract bargaining process, and we disaggregated focus groups by age and gender interests to test for hidden voices. This provided us with a design that would allow us to derive, we hoped, answers to two research questions: would villagers give accurate reports concerning the treatments they had selected, and were responses significantly different by group.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

Since 2010 researchers from Njala, Wageningen, Cambridge and Chicago universities have partnered the Gola Rainforest National Park (GRNP, or Gola Forest project). GRNP operates in 7 chiefdoms of eastern Sierra Leone: Malema, Gaura, Nomo, Barri, Makpele, Kori and Tunkia. The language of these areas is Mende. A baseline survey of c. 2000 randomly chosen households was carried out in 182 Gola Forest programme villages in 2010. The researchers were later asked by GRNP to advise on the impact of the project's livelihood support to the communities.

The research team chose to do this by asking the project to carry out randomized trials of community-preferred treatments, which the researchers then carefully followed. A particular set of treatments was designed to measure the effectiveness of different ways of distributing inputs needed for community improvements. These three treatments were as follows: money to chief, money to households and money for work, for a range of small infrastructure objectives chosen by the community (e.g. construction of toilets, improvements to community meeting house, and so forth).

A retrospective qualitative study was then designed, using focus group methods, to assess how well communities understood and responded to the experiment in which they had taken part. Did communities accurately report the interventions in which they had taken part? Were there differences in response by group? For this qualitative assessment 16 villages were randomly selected from among the treatment and control groups, four each representing the three treatments and four adjacent control villages not within the scope of recent GNRP interventions.

Protocols [more to be added]

Description of earlier work and experiment [Maarten]

Protocols (rules governing data collection procedures and analytical choices) are as important in qualitative as in quantitative research. The team established codes for data gathering procedures in the 16 villages. These codes also established how team facilitators and participants in focus groups were expected to behave. [Add further description of FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL - Appendix

Participants: In each village it was proposed there would be five independent focus group sessions - these groups were chosen with local ideas about social status and gender distinctions in mind. The aim was to free participants from any "monitoring" by authority. Women (it was reasoned) would be more free to speak in a woman's group than when male village elders were included in the group. All individuals self-sorted to the available groups.

The groups were as follows:

1. Elders – these are generally older and mainly male members of "citizen" (*tali*) lineages (*ndehu*). The group self-sorted, and some leading women chose to include themselves in this group. Each group of elders thus comprised town chiefs, youth leaders, *soweisia* (female societal heads), and religious leaders.
2. Women – ordinary young women (20+ years), older married women, and widows
3. Youths – ordinary men from c. 18 to 40 and younger but adult women (18+ years) [when data are reported this includes gender composition of groups]
4. Boys – From c. 5 to c. 17 years
5. Girls – From c. 5 to c. 17 years.

Other groupings could have been chosen. One such group would be people who count (under chieftdom administrative rules) as strangers. Mende villages are divided into citizens (*tali*) and strangers (*hota*). A stranger is defined as someone not born in that community, and thus not a member of a lineage recognized by the community to have land-owning rights. Land ownership is a key issue between the villages and the Gola Forest project. The reserved forest belongs historically to communities but has been placed in the trust of the government for conservation. Land owners expect to receive benefits for having granted land use rights to conservation. This is the basic reason that communities receive development assistance. Male strangers are mainly attracted to the forest edge by economic opportunities (they may reside in a village to buy commodities, to labour on tree-crop farms, to hunt or to mine minerals such as diamonds). Female strangers are more numerous, since many are local women who have moved to their present location on marriage. Thus asking people to group as citizens and strangers would have cut across a sorting by gender. Equally importantly, strangers are under the authority of a head (the *hota kee*, literally stranger father). This is a highly individualized system of patron-client relations. Asking strangers to meet as a group would be seen as asking them to deny their loyalty to a specific patron and to speak as a group. Experience shows that this would lead largely to silence. Instead it was preferred to keep a record of citizen and stranger status. It is possible to analyze results in terms of statements made by persons belonging to these two groups, but these are not analyzed below.

Protocol (for focus group) and training

A draft protocol was designed by two persons - the present author and Paul Richards (Njala University, one of the lead researchers). It specified the steps to be taken in the research in the 16 villages (Appendix 1). It covered the activities of both facilitators (research assistants) and participants. Facilitators underwent a one-week training in applying the protocol. The team comprised only qualified members (mother-tongue knowledge of Mende speaker, some knowledge of the working terrain, training on all aspects of the protocol, training on behaviour in villages and during focus group session) Facilitators were selected only after having passed both a practical and a theoretical test. During training the draft protocol was further emended to suit the environment of the 16 villages. Further guidance was given on language and culture: notably, how to approach the communities (via elders), and the issue of greeting gifts (*famalosia*), e.g. how and when these were to be made, etc. All training was in Mende, from day one and including practical aspects. This was to ensure that facilitators were alert to linguistic nuances of expression likely to be used in village focus groups. Mende expression is sometimes allusive rather than direct, especially in village contexts. Disagreement is often hedged around in polite words, all of which the facilitators would need to be aware of. The protocol was then translated into Mende and tested, and there was general discussion about all cultural aspect of the work. This include how correctly to pose questions in Mende Language: *Gbo maluva ga le E we ga tagehun (ya gbagba or ya nyamua layo) vo vale hun en gbe vo ge hun.* Attitudes to work and community were also discussed.

Facilitators were trained to avoid all leading questions, but also to recognize and avoid leading questions from participants in focus groups, or questions designed to elicit promises of future benefits. Sometimes pressing private concerns came into focus group sessions (e.g. "my child is sick"). Facilitators were trained how to handle such situations (to include the statements made, but to mark and annotate them for the analysts). Issues of greetings and deportment in meetings were also discussed. Training also included guidance on managerial activities: facilitators were to allow groups to self-sort, and were not to supervise division of the community into groups, even if this seemed odd (e.g. presence of women in the group of predominantly male elders). But they were also to be alert to community managerial activity likely to compromise the integrity of group results (an obvious example would be the posting of an senior authority figure to sit with a children's group - though in fact this never happened).

Note was to be taken of all activities to be performed by facilitators both in groups and in the community (division of tasks, the functions of the team leader in regard to the protocol and in general). This covered rules for issuing the cards that people needed to 'trade' with the facilitator in order speak. The card system was necessary to guarantee anonymity of speakers but also to track the running order of statements in each session. (The analytical use of these run order numbers is discussed below.) How the cards were to be issued and use of "vanguards" (flip charts) were also topics in training. Groups had two vanguards: one each for good and bad changes to be listed. The card system helped inform participants to signal what statements they considered to be good and bad changes, and also helped the facilitators keep a correct record of each session, for coding on to record sheets. The information recorded comprised village ID, age of speaker, group of speaker, run number of the statement, card number of the statement, gender, age, civic status, and occupation of speaker, whether the statement was considered a good or bad change, and the group and plenary ranking of the statement.

Pilot. After training, a pilot test was done in a village not part of the research sample. A letter was sent to this village to inform the chief of the team visit, and what was expected from both parties; for example, the number of days to be spent in the community, what the research was about, where the team was from, etc. During this visit, mistakes were identified and corrected. Some of these were to do with elimination of leading questions or explanatory remarks that would suggest a direct link between the focus group team and GRNP asset distribution activities. Others concerned the correct handling of the run order record keeping system (see below). The attitudes of the

community to the pilot were also assessed; did they understand the activities, how were statements about changes to be framed, etc.

Quantitative method results in numbers. It is hard to see the expressive content in bare numbers. A potential advantage of a qualitative method is that the data convey an expressive element; feelings of respondents can be put into words (and interpreted), but also skilled facilitators can take account of what Goffman (1966) calls "back stage" aspects of public discourse (for example, cues that allude to a discourse among participants about tacit understandings). The researcher accompanied teams to five of the 16 villages and observed these "back stage" aspects at first hand. The lead facilitators were trained to keep a notebook in which they recorded "back stage" aspects. Many meetings in Mende villages take place in open-sided meeting halls known as a *barri* (*semei*, in Mende). Around the building many people gather, either because they are working outside their houses, or consciously eaves-dropping events in the *barri*. Notes were kept on any observed interactions with this "side" audience, especially if they appeared animated by statements in the meeting.

A second issue also had to be addressed. Experience and research have shown that most meetings held in village communities are difficult to handle because people come and go; some people are hardly in the meeting (in effect they shuttle between the meeting and the community making side comments outside the *barri*). All these movements were taken into account by one member of the team designated to track them. Notes were taken on all observed front and back stage conversations, and on side comments by participants during focus group sessions. Using the card system, people who did not speak in the meetings were noted and later asked in private why they had chosen not to speak. The commonest explanation was that someone had already made the point they would have made. Of course, this might have been an easy excuse, perhaps hiding fear or simmering resentment. But again the facilitators were asked to note any clues provided by body language.

Focus groups have been used with children (e.g. to investigate the impact of training on avoiding sexual abuse) but we know of no cases in which children have been asked to comment in parallel on topics discussed by adults. In the Mende village environment children are hardly encouraged to attend meetings (either because it is thought their intervention would show disrespect to elders, or because they are noisy in public ["pollute the air"]). Children were included in the study both to encourage them to take part in public deliberations on community matters and to get in the habit of attending meeting, but also to see if they had different things to tell in regard to negative and positive changes in the village, when viewed from the perspective of the youngest. Some of the "children" were in fact young teenagers. The category "youth" in rural Sierra Leone is a peculiar one by standards elsewhere, since it refers mainly to adult men of low social status as well as young adults. Some "youths" are in fact middle aged. Including focus groups for boys and girls allowed the study to tap a more truly representative sample of the opinions and observations of the young. Rural adults in Sierra Leone hardly encourage children to attend public meetings.. This is because adults have an ambiguous attitude to their children. They deeply care for them, but also think they are of little account when considered alongside an older person in a public arena. This means that children sometimes see and hear things an adult might not expect. In fact part of the fear that adults have of children in public is that they are known to speak the truth because they have not yet incorporated the social values of shame and respect. As Mariane Ferme states it is "...because they do not yet embody distinct social identities, children can cross boundaries between ordinary and ritual practices and between public and secret discursive domains, which adults are more reluctant to transgress."

Field Visit. After the pilot test, a further day's training was held for the facilitators to share their experiences of the pilot. A final selection was made of those qualified to proceed to the field. Last

adjustments were made to the research protocols before a field trip was authorized by the management of the Njala-Wageningen research team. The approved protocol was then used for field work. Two field teams were formed, each with 6 members.

After pilot testing and corrections various activities are undertaken: 1. preparation of field visit schedule (number of trips per team and where), 2. letters to be sent to the chiefs of the 16 sample villages informing them about the teams' visit, 3. purchase of stationery, rain gear, medicine and printing of documents was completed, and 4. payment of facilitators for training and field allowances was disbursed.

[More to follow on opening remarks, informed consent, etc]

Focus groups were convened to discuss one two-part (non-leading) question: "what changes have there been - either positive or negative - in this community in the years 2012 and 2013". Facilitators explained that groups should discuss both parts. They also tracked the statements, and were allowed to intervene if they found that a group had become stuck in a groove of negative or positive changes. They would then suggest a change, but with offering further prompts.

Participants spoke only after requesting a card numbered to track speaker and statement. All statements were recorded [on a flip chart]. When all comment was exhausted then facilitators would ask the group to rank the statements in order of importance. There were two ranking sessions per village. 1. Group ranking, and 2. Village ranking. During group ranking activities, a member volunteered to read out the statements. All ranking was done through voting. All statements made by the participants in Mende were translated and recorded by the facilitator in English. The reason for this is that a standardized orthography for Mende has only recently begun to be taught in Sierra Leonean primary schools. The facilitators were mainly of a generation that was never taught to read and write in Mende. Thus their "instant" attempts to render a Mende statement into written form would not be reliably and unambiguously clear to another Mende speaker. Ironically, some of the children in the focus group sessions can read and write correct Mende, but this would not help village adults in the session since many cannot read or write at all. Thus it was judged safer to have the statements translated and written down in English by the facilitator, who then translated the statement back into Mende for the ranking. The facilitator then read all written ranked statements back to the audience for corrections before finally transferring ranked statement on to the field documents to be used in the plenary session.

The plenary session was organized as follows: ranked statements were read into the ears of a group representative by the facilitator and the group representative then voiced it out in Mende to the audience. All groups ranking statements (Good changes) were written in English on to a final "vanguard" and then translated into Mende for the audience to see and confirm by one of the group facilitators. The combined groups then made a final ranking of all statements for their community. All final plenary rankings were re-read in Mende to the audience for any corrections before a final sheet was made as a record for the community. One of the reasons for making group and plenary rankings was to see how they compared. Of particular interest is whether the more powerful groups (notably, elders) would impose their own rankings on the rankings of the more junior groups, suggesting that a kind of discursive hegemony might be at play in general focus group meetings. These important results are not discussed below but will be presented in a fuller report, which will also include a detailed analysis of the 1089 collected statements by gender, age, and social status. For now, the paper focuses on the issue of whether the experiment and its treatments and controls can be recognized in the data provided by 76 focus groups from the 16 villages visited in April-May 2014.

II. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

As described above, sixteen villages were visited for this study - 12 treatment and 4 control villages. The 12 treatment villages were allocated randomly to treatments 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Villages in each treatment received money for community development purposes but via three different distribution mechanisms. These were: 1. payments to individuals after work on the local road, 2. a top down grant via the village chief, 3. small payments to individuals as gifts they could use in any way they chose (but many chose or were instructed by village authorities to contribute to a community fund).

The focus group research design described above was then applied. The means of generating qualitative feedback via a focus group methodology was used in order to test whether focus groups generated correct information about treatments received, and whether the analysis team could recognize the treatment and control villages from the focus group statements provided.

The field research and data analysis teams were blind to the allocation of treatments by villages. The analysts worked only with village numbers until the final stage of analysis. Data were generated by asking five groups in each village - elders, women, youth, boys and girls - working independently, to report on positive and negative changes in their communities in the two years 2012 and 2103 (the period over which the treatments had been administered).

All meetings were held in the Mende language, mother tongue of the field researcher and facilitators. Facilitators recorded statements on flip charts in English (a standardized Mende orthography was not taught in Sierra Leone primary schools until recently, and not all facilitators were familiar with its orthographic conventions) and translated the statements back to the audience into Mende when further discussion was required (such as when groups ranked statements in order of importance). In all, 1089 such statements were elicited, divided approximately equally into positive (48.94%) and negative (51.06%) changes. The prompt question was intended not to "lead" responses and this is confirmed by the symmetrical distribution of answers.

The English translations were recorded in field notebooks and checked. They were then input into XL spreadsheet files. Each XL record comprises facilitator and data input clerk ID, village ID, name of group (elders, women, youths, etc), the run number of the statement (where it appears in the sequence of the ongoing discussion), the actual statement regarding change (and whether it was considered positive or negative), its group ranking and plenary ranking, and comments by facilitators (for example, facilitators tracked participants who had not spoken to check in private if they wanted to explain their silence). A single file was made in an Open Office Spreadsheet Application to align negative and positive changes by group and village.

Before turning to analysis of the results some comments need to be made about two issues that may have some bearing on interpretation of the data. First, the research team leader was already well-known in the sampled villages because she had previously led field teams for a large baseline survey of 182 forest-edge communities. She wanted to test whether her presence had any effect on the results. She did this by dividing supervision activities between herself and an experienced facilitator. In all she visited half the sample, comprising three chiefdoms and eight villages: Malema (village 272 [Sefula] and village 322 [Malima Geiya]), Gaura (village 140 [Sanola] and village 142 [Senahun Buima]) and Tunkia (village 403 [Bo]). There is clear evidence her presence affected topics discussed by focus groups in one village (Sanola) though none of these comments associated her with the experimental treatments.

The second issue concerns the total number of focus groups. This should have been 80 (5 x 16 villages) but in the event is 76. Numbers of groups fell short in three villages: Village 02 has

statements from only three groups (Youths, Women and Elders), while villages 272 and 403 lack statements from girls. The reasons are as follows. Village 02 is now deserted and group activities were organized among former inhabitants in Sembahun (Barrie Chiefdom) where the Town Chief Dugba resides. The researchers were unable to locate any children to participate. In Village 272 the girls were young, and not able to express any statement about their community. Village 403 also had no girl group. This is a village where boys are sent from other villages to learn the Koran, and most of girls found in this village were also too young to participate in a focus group.

Experimental treatments (designed by the research team) were implemented by the Gola Forest project (Gola National Park Rain Forest authority). The first analytical exercise was to identify all statements about positive and negative changes over the two years 2012 and 2013 credited by participants in focus group sessions to the Gola Forest project. The second analytical exercise was to seek to link these valid statements to experimental treatments. By implication, control group villages would be those where there were no valid statements referring to experimental treatments implemented by Gola Forest project.

After all statements from focus group sessions had been entered into the spreadsheet they were carefully checked. Particular attention was paid to statements specifying activity by Goal (an NGO), Gold Tree (an agribusiness company) and Gola Forest project (the Gola Rain Forest National Park authority), to ensure that these had not been confused during data entry. A decision protocol was developed to identify activity credited by participants in focus groups to the Gola Forest project (Table 1). The protocol was applied to the entire set of statements by two researchers (the team leader and a second researcher). The second researcher had worked on the research design, but who did not participate in the actual fieldwork.

TABLE 1: Analytical Protocol I - criteria for identifying Gola Forest project activity

No.	Identification
1	Mention of Gola Forest Project - Synonyms: GPG, GRNP, Gola Project, Gola Forest Programme, Gola Programme
2	Decision criterion for Gola Project not to be accepted without further contextual evidence: - Gola – this could be a typo for Gold an NGO - Gold Forest – this could be Gold Tree a produce buying company - Gola Forest – this could be the actual Gola Forest not the project
3	Where an activity is mentioned but the agency is implied rather than named. Criteria include: - Mention of menu - Mention of money given - Mention of a community action fund - Mention of a game played Decision: two or more of the above must be present

The protocol mandated further scrutiny of any statement mentioning Gola, Gola Forest Programme, Gola Rain National Park and Gola Project, or any activities credited explicitly or by implication to Gola Forest project, or to Njala, Wageningen and Chicago university researchers. Care was taken to discard statements where the phrase "Gola Forest" meant not the project but the actual forest (as in statements about crop damage caused by wild animals from Gola Forest).

Some debates took place between the two assessors about the application of the first analytic protocol. There were some initial disagreements on whether to include statements like "Gola Forest brought medicines for the treatment of women and children at a free cost", since this was not included in any of the experimental treatments, nor was it known to be any part of the work of the Gola Forest project. Such statements were included in this first round of analysis since Gola Forest project was clearly mentioned. There was also some debate about whether to disregard any statement mentioning research partners (Njala etc) but not the implementing partner (Gola Forest project). These statements were set aside and later analyzed separately (see below). The reason was that all experimental treatments were administered by Gola Forest project. Mention of research partners might have referred to other, earlier research activities. In addition, respondents may have been influenced by a letter of introduction and the text of an informed consent form, both of which, when translated to participants, mentioned Njala University. A reduced list of statements mentioning only activities of Gola Forest project was then produced. A third person was invited to review the selection of statements made.

As an initial analytical step changes credited to Gola Forest project activities (as identified through application of Protocol 1) were calculated as percentages of all positive and negative changes mentioned by focus group members. The negative changes credited to Gola Forest project were only 68 (12.23% of all negative changes). Positive changes were much larger (239, 44.84% of all positive changes). Attention was focused on positive changes. In Table 2 these are arranged in rank order of village by percentage of changes credited to Gola Forest project. For the top 6 villages the proportion of changes credited to Gola Forest intervention ranges between 50-70%. The expectation was that the four control villages would identify themselves by showing zero (or very low) percentages. The only focus group set falling into this category was Village 2. Here, only one statement referenced Gola Forest project but this result was set aside due to the small sample size and special conditions affecting this village (abandonment and relocation). Mention of Gola Forest project interventions ranged from a quarter to a half of all positive changes in as many as nine villages. None had fewer than five apparently valid qualifying statements. A selection of statements is presented in Table 3 to illustrate their similarity. All can be plausibly interpreted as within the scope of the experimental treatments, granted that villagers are reporting (as makes sense from their perspective) on outcomes achieved and not on mechanisms of financial distribution. There was no obvious break in the run of percentages to identify a clear cluster of control villages

Table 2: Negative and positive changes credited to Gola Forest project activities

VILLAGE	BAD				GOOD			
	All	GFP	% all/GFP	RANK	All	GFP	% all/GFP	RANK
403	28	1	3.57%	12	31	22	70.97%	1
14	24	7	29.17%	2	27	18	66.67%	2
443	27	0	0.00%	14	25	16	64.00%	3
322	36	13	36.11%	1	37	22	59.46%	4
399	30	7	23.33%	4	24	14	58.33%	5
85	37	6	16.22%	6	25	14	56.00%	6
321	75	7	9.33%	8	55	30	54.55%	7
328	32	4	12.50%	7	31	13	41.94%	8
75	28	2	7.14%	10	37	15	40.54%	9
137	46	9	19.57%	5	48	17	35.42%	10
140	48	1	2.08%	13	44	15	34.09%	11
142	46	4	8.70%	9	45	15	33.33%	12
125	48	3	6.25%	11	35	11	31.43%	13
468	23	0	0.00%	14	33	10	30.30%	14
272	16	4	25.00%	3	18	5	27.78%	15
2	10	0	0.00%	14	7	1	14.29%	16

Village Code	Examples of Focus Group Statements
2	We received some visitors from Gola Forest who wrote down our names and promised us some benefits which are looking forward to
85	Gola Forest helped us with zinc after a road work
142	Gola Forest gave us money to do some work - road maintenance - and food was given which served us for some time
321	Provision of livelihood materials by Gola Forest.
468	Gola Forest provided us with livelihood support
272	Presentation of building materials for the construction of mosque by GFP [Gola Forest Project]
328	A menu was supplied in which the vouchers were given by Gola Forest worth Le 60.000 per person

Table 3: A sample of statements referring to activities undertaken by villagers with Gola Forest project disbursements

A second analytic protocol was then developed intended to challenge more robustly the notion of "qualifying statement" (Table 4). Village sets of positive statements (amalgamating all focus groups per village) were re-examined for evidence of least three independent statements mentioning treatments. Three independent statements of valid treatments is assumed to be enough to reject the hypothesis that the village in question is a control village. Dependent statements (to be discarded) are defined as any statement that follows a previous statement within the same focus group session, with same words and content (and only that content). If the statement repeats a previous statement but then adds new content it is accepted as an independent statement, or if it is an exact repetition, but uttered in another focus group session, it is retained. The focus group run number preserves information on which person spoke on what topic and the order in which they spoke, while preserving anonymity of the speaker (as required for informed consent). Run numbers were used to decide which statements to discard. Repetition was quite common, since facilitators encouraged all participants to speak. For some participants this was the first time they had ever spoken in public, and they were told that it was better to repeat something already said than to remain silent.

TABLE 4: Analytical Protocol II: Identifying experimental treatments

1. A decision rule is adopted to identify village treatments, namely a village is a treatment village if there are three or more clear independent statement referring to project treatments.
2. All dependent statements are excluded. Dependent statements are defined as any statement substantively identical with the immediate previous statement as identified by focus group run order number
3. All mention of Gola Forest activity is screened for specific evidence of known experimental treatments (e.g. detail regarding disbursement modality, such as menu, community development fund, or work for cash)

A summary of valid statements accepted for analysis is presented in Table 5.

Village	All good	GFP good	Statements satisfying decision rule
403	31	22	5
14	27	18	7
443	25	16	7
322	37	22	7

399	24	14	6
85	25	14	5
321	55	30	9
328	31	13	4
75	37	15	5
137	48	17	6
140	44	15	12
142	45	15	5
125	35	11	6
468	33	10	5
272	18	5	3
2	7	1	0

Table 5: Distribution of focus group statements about negative and positive changes by village in years 2012-2013 (GFP = Gola Forest project)

The full data set (Appendix 2) shows village, focus group, run number, and accepted statements (in bold type).

Using the decision rules above, only Village 02 shows no evidence of Gola Forest treatments. It is rather surprising to find that all 15 other villages appear to satisfy the criteria for having received an experimental treatment. The most marginal case is Village 272 which has three independent statements of specific treatments. Only if the decision criterion was raised to 5 independent reports or more would Villages 2, 272 and 328 be considered candidate control villages. The overall conclusion is that the focus group, used according to the method outlined above, designed to guard against the effect of leading questions, and applied through a consistent and rigorous set of protocols, failed to detect both the control villages and the three experimental treatments.

III. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Despite robust challenge to the data set 15 out of 16 villages produced three or more focus group statements that can be interpreted as evidence of Gola Forest experimental treatments. The one exception is the control village (02), now deserted, where the people and chief live elsewhere. There is not enough evidence for this settlement to conclude that it is a control village. In the other cases the evidence seems firm. Statements come from up to five group discussions per village, held separately to avoid the elders controlling what was said. Repeated statements were eliminated. For analysis to indicate that 15 villages had treatments, not the 12 that were actually treated, there seem two to be at least two competing explanations. Either there is something flawed about the focus group method, perhaps due to management of public discourse by "back-stage" operators, or the data are inherently noisy.

First some comments are directed to the backstage operators. A frontstage-backstage distinction regarding the motivation of social agents was first proposed by Goffman (1966). The framework was applied to the analysis of village meetings among the Mende by anthropologist William Murphy. Murphy (1990) described a case in which an aspirant for election as a minor chief said one thing about his motivation and loyalties in public meetings, and another thing to power-brokers who would decide the election behind the scenes. In private conversation Murphy elicited from the informant a complex strategy that would only fully materialize in subsequent chieftaincy contests. The key thing to note is that Murphy's informant was skilled in manipulating behind-the-scenes positions at variance with his public statements.

This possibility (that powerful elders might say things in public with strong strategic intent, and thus misrepresent actual events or circumstances) was anticipated in the research design and analytical protocols. To control for this possibility the five focus groups per village were held separately. Additionally, a plenary ranking session was held in all villages, and although the data are not here analyzed, this was intended to show the extent to which concerns of "big people" overrode the concerns of (e.g.) children and youth. Note should be taken of the fact that children had their own groups. Mende people, according to Ferme (2002), are somewhat in awe of children's ability to move across boundaries, and hear and say things they should not. In fact, the statements of the child groups did little more than back up what other groups said. More generally, in no case was a judgment attempted concerning the control or treatment status of a village by taking account of statements made in only one group. In Village 272 - a threshold case where only three valid statements were accepted - it should be noted that these statements came from persons located in three different focus group sessions.

There may be an inherent weakness in focus group method, as used in the conditions described above, namely that in public discourse at the level of a small village participants (despite assurances of anonymity) are not anonymous to each other, so there may have been a significant degree of reflexive monitoring and self-censorship. Even the children may have been affected by self-censorship, since only rarely are they included in public consultations, and this may have put them on their guard to behave as "responsibly" and "grown-up" as possible. Seemingly, they rather effortlessly reproduced the kind of discourse over development needs most likely to trigger positive response from field development agencies. Further comment is made below on the possibility that discourse between development agencies and recipients is already structured in such a way that "stock" responses are generated, including (in this case) an apparent tendency to "talk experimental" (even where no treatment has been received).

The idea that an inherently noisy background has confused the signal from the experiment seems to receive considerable support from an examination of the local context.

2. All operational areas for the Gola Forest programme have other development and commercial agencies operating alongside. Some of these agencies operate in partnership with the Gola Forest project. These include the German rural development agency Welthungerhilfe, and "Across the River" (a conservation initiative focusing on the "corridor" zone between the national forest conservation programmes in Liberia and Sierra Leone). By bad luck, sampling for the experiment selected some villages within the sphere of operations of "Across the River". There were some similarities between the menu of choices villagers were offered by the two projects. The Gola Forest project menu is illustrated in Figure 1. Sometimes, additional background knowledge allowed disambiguation of statements. So for instance, Gola Forest project did not distribute groundnut seed but "Across the River" did. Thus all mention of groundnut seed distribution is assumed to be "Across the River", even if attributed to Gola Forest project. Welthungerhilfe was also operational in some of the 16 villages. It repaired houses, and gave materials for building, and working tools to communities. To add to the potential confusion there was a non-governmental development organization called Goal, and a farming business called Goldtree operating in several of the Gola Forest villages. Two businesses, Goldtree, and a cocoa firm known as Tropical Farms, offered farmers community improvements (Goldtree repaired a bridge, for example), as well as paying rents to land-owning families. Thus there was little or no possibility to develop an experiment with truly distinctive treatments, since the researchers had to operate with Gola Forest project as their development partner, and the Gola Forest project staff drew on a shared pool of ideas about how to invest in public goods in forest-edge communities.

3. It is also important to understand that from the community perspective all development inputs are related to a shared set of problems. In effect, it is the proverbial case where to a hammer every problem looks like a nail. Every community needs a meeting house known as a barri. It is a requirement for any kind of community mobilization, especially during the rainy season when meeting outdoors is often impossible. The experiment tried to assess the effect of different modalities for distributing financial resources, but from the community perspective most people were hoping only to build or repair a barri, and probably had paid little or no attention to the finer details of inter-village variations in how the money was distributed. If it was paid for work, or given as individual gifts, the money soon found its way into the community barri repair fund. If it was given to the chief, he quickly announced to his grateful subjects that the barri was about to be rebuilt. Only in a few cases did informants add details about the modality (that money was given for work on a road, or that money was given in amounts of Le 60,000 to individuals and then aggregated into a community fund). These statements few are, nevertheless, useful in that they allow at least some villages to be assigned to two treatment categories. But there is not enough information to assign all villages. This means that the control villages cannot be identified by elimination. The same process, it can be argued, moulds inputs from all other donors into a single local story of village development. Other agencies also gave money that in several cases went into repairs to a barri or mosque. Grants-in aid from these other sources were also often accompanied by messages about development as a communal task similar to those expressed by Gola Forest project. Perhaps understandably, the aspects of the experiment appearing distinctive to researchers soon merged (in local eyes) into the general form of a common model or "trope" of development.
4. At one point it was noticed that a considerable number of statements referred to Njala University and its research partners (one statement specifically named Chicago University). These statements were excluded by the analytical protocols, since there was a considerable chance they might have been triggered by a mention of Njala in the reading of the letter of introduction and informed consent protocol. It was thought worth extracting them however, to see which villages they identified. Combined with five villages where a treatment menu was mentioned, the ten villages where Njala researchers were mentioned form a distribution as represented by the Venn diagram in Figure 2. Three villages overlap the "menu" and "Njala" sectors. It was then anticipated that the four remaining villages, in a group on their own, might be the control villages. This proved not to be the case, though they do constitute one of the treatment groups. Figure 2 may not have identified treatments and controls, but it shows that there was a sizeable number of people in focus groups sessions aware that they were part of a research programme. It is worth discussing what this means. The background to the experiment is an important element in this respect. A substantial number of forest-edge communities had been included in various earlier research exercises. These involved participation in artefactual experiments. As compensation for time spent playing these games, participants were either allowed to keep their winnings, or were given (in the case of losers) the cash equivalent of a day's manual labour. Some of the 20 statements mentioning Njala had an interesting format reflecting knowledge of this previous research phase - they were of the general form "we played a game and received [a specified] development benefit". In these communities an agency arrives, tests the sincerity or willingness to participate in a programme by setting a test [this test might be to form a farming group and raise a small contribution to the envisaged activity from local resources] and then (when the test is passed) returns to implement the programme in full. It seems not unreasonable to suppose that the researchers from Njala etc. were seen as setting the usual test of sincerity, when they ran their experiments. Experimentation was later coupled to distribution of benefits (in the intervention here assessed). What further proof would a villager need that this was a new variant on the usual NGO development pattern? Pass the test of sincerity and the benefit arrives. But still it is necessary to explain why control

villages also assumed they were playing the same game. This could be because Njala, Wageningen and Chicago researchers were already better known in the villages than they assumed. In any case the introductory letter was a give-away. Although Village 2 produced only seven statements in all (for reasons explained) it seems significant that one woman stated *We received some visitors from Gola Forest who wrote down our names and promised us some benefit which we are looking forward to*. Whether Village 2 was a treatment or control village clearly she already knew how to play the game.

In all evidence above there is no clear signal as to the identity of the four control villages and twelve treatment villages. This might lead to one of two conclusions. Either the focus group methodology is flawed when applied as a qualitative assessment of experimental interventions, or the background to the experiment was too noisy (specifically, that there are unmeasured spill-over effects from other development projects operating in the area). The internal evidence from the focus group data sets is that individuals responded in appropriate ways. Most statements were confirmed by other statements, suggesting they were either factually truthful or widely believed errors. The consciously neutral two-part "starter" question about changes in the village was answered with a balanced list of positive and negative changes. Although the focus group has in recent years been modified far from its originators' intentions it is concluded that it is nevertheless a useful tool in judging public opinion, when applied painstakingly, with attention to separating out the voices of different groups, and where the pattern of interventions in focus group discussions is carefully tracked so that over-intrusive voices and subsequent editorial over-rides can be identified, as attempted in the present case. In this limited sense, at least, it is perhaps possible for focus groups to assist in the speaking of truth to power. When it comes to experiments, however, maybe the conclusion is not so positive. Social science experiments have been hailed as a way of resolving ambiguities surrounding survey-based assessments of development interventions. But difficulties have surfaced over what the numbers resulting from these experiments actually mean. Qualitative methods have been suggested as a way to gain a better understanding of mechanisms and processes hiding behind the numbers. In the present case, the focus group method has served only to reveal the extreme noisiness of the background. Perhaps this noise is intrinsic to a world of vigorous and at times chaotic social change. Perhaps only in the laboratory is true control a possibility. In a real-time world of public strategizing and back-stage intrigue (as documented for the Mende by Murphy 1990) the experiment seems a fragile plant, vulnerable to the strong winds of social life beating down upon it.

1.

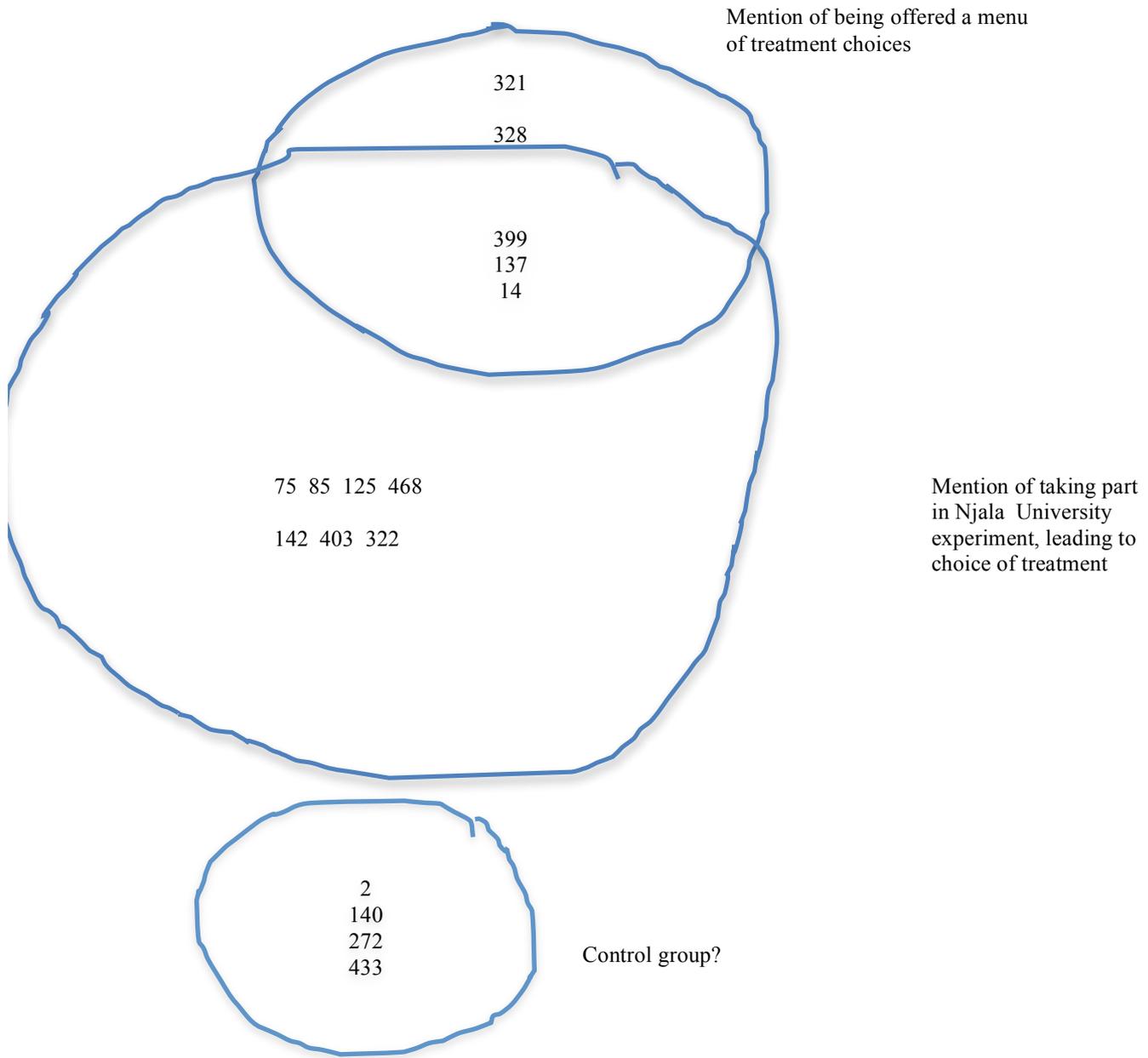


Figure 2: Evidence for three treatment groups and one control group?

[Villages identified by numbers]