

CHAPTER II

Rapid and Participatory Rural Appraisal

Introduction

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Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), the antecedent of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), grew out of an impatience with conventional survey methods, which typically took so long to produce findings that they were of little use for practical purposes of policy formulation and planning. The development of this approach coincided with a growing level of uneasiness with conventional methods on more substantive grounds - summarized in Chambers' now-famous phrase "survey slavery". In contrast to the questionnaire survey, RRA techniques were less rigid and yielded results more rapidly. The following were prominent.

- **Semi-structured interviews:** These are essentially "guided conversations", in which the interviewer has a set of issues in mind and addresses these, but at the same time allows a conversation to develop naturally, thus (a) avoiding much of the artificiality of a questionnaire-based interview and (b) eliciting

information the questionnaire designer might never have thought to include in the schedule.

- **Transects:** This is a walk through an area with informed local persons, where the interviewer asks questions and listens to what the resource persons have to say about objects and processes observed *en route*.
- **Time Line:** Here, a village (or other local area) history is constructed by identifying important occurrences in the area's history and then tying processes in the subject under investigation to these same events.
- **Seasonality Diagramming:** This is an extremely powerful tool, which enables the investigator and informant together to identify interactions in seasonal problems in crop production, food availability, labor requirements, etc.

- **Matrix Ranking:** This is another exceptionally powerful technique. It permits farmers to rank the relative merits of e.g. tree species, crop varieties and livestock breeds with respect to various farmer-identified desiderata.

PRA originated in the NGO sector, which saw great merits in RRA techniques but tended to view the approach as extractive, insofar as it took information from villagers but gave nothing in return. As currently used by NGOs, PRA is only one of a set of participatory approaches; they employ RRA techniques — alongside others like wealth ranking and participatory mapping, which were later developed by PRA practitioners — as part of an initial appraisal phase of a project, during which problems and potential solutions are identified in full and equal collaboration with rural people. The appraisal is seen very much as a first phase in a process aimed at solving grassroots problems with the full and active participation of the people who face these problems in their daily lives.

“Extractive” is perhaps an unfair term to apply to RRA when used for policy analysis. Although in comparison with participatory approaches as used by NGOs, it confers no direct benefits on the local population; if it leads to improved policies it can benefit them indirectly. Moreover being macro in scale it can also benefit a larger number of people in a shorter period of time. In any case, the distinction between PRA and RRA has become somewhat blurred with usage, and the term “participatory” has tended to replace “rapid” across the board.

The really important differences are between the RRA/PRA approach on the one hand, and more conventional methods on the other: (a) the former treat the local population as equal partners in the process of identifying problems and potential solutions, rather than as mere data sources; (b) as far as possible, they also avoid the use of questionnaires, especially in the early

stages. Questionnaires, although they serve the researcher's need for a data set that can be processed with the powerful tools of statistical analysis, are rigid (because their questions are pre-set), and this rigidity excludes true participation by the local people. They also, good intentions notwithstanding, tend to constitute an effective barrier to communication between the (literate) enumerator and the (usually illiterate) respondent.

SOURCES

The RRA/PRA approach is developing so rapidly nowadays that it is often difficult to identify sources that have not already become outdated. *RRA Notes* remains the best way of keeping up-to-date with this fast-evolving methodology. The basic rationale for the participatory approach is best expressed given in Chambers' seminal work on rural development (Chambers 1982). The Proceedings volume from Thailand (Khon Kaen University 1987) probably gave the first really comprehensive overview of RRA, and is still extremely useful. Chambers (1992) is an excellent source on more recent developments, and includes a discourse the RRA-PRA distinction. A recent and extremely helpful review of PRA philosophy and techniques in a South Asian context appears in Mascarenhas *et al* 1991. In the specific context of Nepal, there are two widely used sources. Campbell and Gill (1991) is an audio-slide training module with a manual explaining the PRA rationale and approach (available in both Nepali and English versions). Regmi (1993) is a handbook (in Nepali) for PRA practitioners detailing the approach and methodology.²

THE PAPERS

The three papers that comprise this chapter illustrate ways in which the RRA/PRA approach has been used in different situations in Nepal and India. The first is pure PRA as described earlier, whereas the other two are more like the

original RRA in their orientation. However all of them, justifiably, use the name PRA, since all three use participatory approaches.

An interesting point of similarity between the three papers is that they all deal, to a varying extent, with indigenous knowledge. The authors' interest in this topic is indicative of a respect for rural people, a belief in the validity of their thought processes and in the relevance and value of their discoveries. Such a mind set is an essential aspect of the participatory approach.

A point of divergence between the papers hinge around their apparently different topical foci, respectively watershed management, forestry, and irrigation. However, in Nepal, these three themes are highly integrated with each other and with the farming systems which are at the hub of the present conference. Any system is an assemblage of objects and processes that interact within an identifiable boundary, and the boundary of most irrigation systems is the watershed. Within watersheds trees are *objects* of crucial importance in determining *processes* such as run-off, seasonality of water flow and soil erosion, all of which in turn determine the nature and extent - even the possibility - of irrigation. Agriculture and forestry systems in Nepal are also inextricably interwoven via flows of soil nutrients, raw materials, food, fodder, labor, incomes and so forth.

In the first paper, Mascarenhas provides an extremely useful "blow-by-blow account" of how the PRA approach is used by NGOs in South India in watershed development projects. However, it is important that this account should not

be viewed as a "cookbook" (nor is it meant to be); flexibility, "embracing error" and learning by doing are essential features of the participatory approach. The second half of the Mascarenhas paper provides, by way of contrast, a very thoughtful set of reflections on the ethics of data collection in rural communities and the uses to which this data might legitimately and morally be put.

The Messerschmidt-Hammett paper concentrates on the use of RRA/PRA methods in the area of indigenous forest management systems, particularly in the realm of what are conventionally called "minor forest products" (but which are frequently far from minor in Nepal in the role they play in the livelihood systems of poor rural people). This paper provides an excellent example of how such techniques can quickly yield meaningful results in terms of identifying challenges and opportunities in the area in question, and in defining policy action that can address the challenges by exploiting the opportunities.

The last paper aims to tie together four inter-related Workshop themes: irrigation, participatory methods, indigenous knowledge and agricultural and natural resource management policy. The linkages between PRA, indigenous management systems and policy analysis are especially important to establish, in view of the questions that inevitably arise about the relevance of such approaches to the practical business of achieving rapid, sustainable and cost-effective development of Nepal's often fragile agricultural natural resource base.

Notes

¹ Program Leader, *Policy Analysis in Agriculture and Related Resource Management*, HMG Ministry of Agriculture/ Winrock International. The usual disclaimers apply.

² For full citations of the references please see Gill's paper entitled: "Irrigation Policy Research in Nepal: Using PRA Methods to Investigate and Incorporate Indigenous Knowledge."