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# The Social and Scientific Context of Rapid Rural Appraisal

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## Introduction

This article is a re-draft of an earlier, more enigmatic title. It seeks to identify the implications of rapid appraisal techniques for legitimating both planning rationalities, and the organisations and classes primarily represented in this rationality. Semantically, rapid appraisal for planning purposes might be regarded as a contradiction in terms; but in the real world the apparent rationality of planning activity has always depended upon the quick availability of information. The scientific issue is whether such information is acquired *in vacuo* and is entirely dependent upon rapid techniques of appraisal, or whether as part of the process of planning the need for categories of information can be predicted and a research basis provided for them. The prevalence of rapid appraisal missions/activities in many poor countries is not just evidence that development funds are available for quick disbursement in the time-frames of agency budgetting procedures, but of the paucity of organised knowledge about the physical and social context of development projects. The prior existence of relevant organised knowledge therefore critically determines the status of the appraisal.

## Ideological Function

Related to this question is the issue of social context of RRA—its purpose and function. Although the appraisal activity is most commonly an *ex-ante* one, proposals for projects and indeed for their location rarely emanate from appraisal personnel who are usually then in a situation of responding to rather than initiating rural development ideas. Thus RRA (and indeed R & D generally) all too frequently performs an ideological, legitimating function for policies which emanate from configurations of class interests as represented in the political process. In this social context there is the further danger of professionalism in consultancy/appraisal work, suggesting a neutral expertise based upon an abstracted notion of rural development (eg literature on extension, optimal farm size, cooperatives, rural credit etc). This professionalism assists in creating the myth of rural development as a technical process—with its own rationality and internal logic.

## Positivist Tendencies

A major concern with RRA is its positivist tendencies. It is most likely to be restricted to the confirmation or refutation of hypotheses derived from the policy initiative without ever determining whether the

hypotheses were relevant or appropriate in the first place—possibly a much more significant conclusion.

For example, if one is trying to determine the feasibility of an unsupervised credit strategy, an RRA exercise might have the objective of identifying whether (a) a factional, vertical cleavage pattern of patronage and allocation existed; or whether (b) this factional pattern had been transformed into a situation of horizontal cleavage in which poorer classes existed as a self-conscious political movement able to monitor and influence the distribution of public funds in a community. These alternative pictures are familiar in rural political sociology but the reasoning misconceived where (c) the patrons themselves constituted a class while at the same time dividing their dependents between them in mutual hostility and competition as a manifestation of the development of the forces of production, demographic change, and so on.

There is likely to be insufficient time for RRA to reach the subtlety of (c), while to confirm or refute (a) or (b) would be relatively easy yet entirely misleading. The absence of (a) could still be consistent with (c) — if one knew about it and not imply the presence of (b). The absence of (b) need not imply (a) but (c). This would matter for the policy initiative since the presence of (b) might be best for the programme, with (a) a much less satisfactory set of conditions—yet still preferable to (c). But the mere confirmation or refutation of either (a) or (b) would not in itself lead to the identification of situation (c) which contains less crude assumptions about the nature of patron-client relations and class formation.

In this example the underlying methodological assumption is that RRA is necessarily positivist<sup>1</sup> (Halfpenny 1979), and as such imposes a logic on the data, restricting beforehand the range of possible conclusions. This might be legitimate under conditions where RRA can add descriptively to knowledge on the basis of well established concepts which are no longer controversial. In such circumstances the appraisal activity is more routine and makes few theoretical demands upon the appraiser.

Is the corollary to this, however, that RRA cannot extend our conceptual understanding of a rural situation except in the negative, indirect sense that refutations

<sup>1</sup>Halfpenny distinguishes four approaches to sociology: positivist, interpretivist, ethnomethodological and structuralist.

provoke further inquiry? The issue here is whether the methods of RRA can be sufficiently unstructured, open-ended and participant to permit initial assumptions and theoretical framework being thrown in to disarray by exposure to unexpected data, allowing it thereby to represent other non-positivist approaches to the generation of knowledge.

### **Attached and Unattached RRA**

These issues can only be resolved by suggesting at least two major categories of RRA, distinguished by their relationship to existing knowledge (relatively attached or unattached) and the extent of formal method involved (perhaps quantitative versus qualitative techniques). In this way we can begin to identify the most misleading category of RRA, as revealed perhaps in the example above, namely the unattached/formal even quantitative type. In this case elegance of technique is harnessed to the investigation of propositions based on either ignorance or prejudice. But to insist only on attached RRA under typical conditions of scarce knowledge would unhelpfully restrict RRA to a positivist role. This is the dilemma, to be resolved only by acknowledging the necessity to depend upon RRA to provide conceptual insights—ie to generate hypotheses rather than merely test them. But the unattached/informal-qualitative type has to be distinguished from casual empiricism or rural development tourism. The paucity of prior organised knowledge implies the absence of indicators with significant and accepted meaning. An attached appraisal reveals the existence or non-existence of indicators, whose theoretical status has been established prior to and independently of the appraisal activity. An unattached appraisal has to rely upon the capacity of the appraiser to determine the significance of variables from the internal evidence—evidence which has not been pre-selected by the inappropriate use of formal methods, nor which is entirely meaningless because it exists in a theoretical vacuum. . . . The repertoire of the unattached appraiser must therefore include a general notion of the use of indicators while delaying judgements concerning their meaning in any specific context.

### **Indicators**

There are two kinds of problem with indicators. First, indicators may easily and forcefully exist for some phenomena, but not for others. Thus there are more likely to be indicators for (a) and (b) above than for (c). Absence of indicators for (a) and (b) might tempt the casual observer to conclude that the rural communities were sufficiently homogenous and free of class conflict to sustain an unsupervised cooperative solution (as in the Comilla experiment, Bangladesh), simply because the indicators for (c) were too subtle—either because the RRA was unattached, too rapid or depended upon

methods designed only to establish the presence of (a) or (b) (revealing a third category of RRA—attached to misconceived knowledge).

Secondly the meaning of an indicator may change according to context, particularly the type of policy initiative envisaged. For example what meaning should be established for kinship relations in understanding the structure of resource allocation in a small community? If strong families capture resources and *always* distribute them to their kin by virtue of kinship relations alone, then genealogical investigation would always yield high returns. But kin proximity to ego may not always be the determining variable. The location of 4ins bore tube-wells in the Comilla programme in Bangladesh appeared to be closely related to the kinship indicator—viz on the plots of the strongest families of the strongest lineages. But with a potential command area of approximately 50 acres, the borings are situated if possible in that part of the strong family's land which will serve other families in the lineage whose land is adjacent by virtue of the historical fragmentation of holdings through the descent of the lineage. In this case, the self-interest of the strong family and kinship relations coincide because that is the way the relevant spatial distribution of landholdings has evolved. But as soon as we move to the distribution of fertiliser, credit, seeds, information, land improvement subsidies etc. involving economic relations between kin (where the *location* of land is not relevant) then in the example from Comilla, the significance of kinship relations changes. These sorts of transactions between kin were dominated by market and usufructuary principles, and the distribution of external variable inputs was dominated by the strong families, who rarely gave assistance to the worker families in the same lineage.

### **Autonomy**

Apart from this issue of indicators the attached/unattached distinction raises other questions of social as well as scientific importance. Central to them is the problem of autonomy of the appraisal activity. Normally the issue of autonomy would be considered in a political context—the extent of political direction, the existence of overt or implicit ideological constraints, the requirement to work within the agenda of negotiable ends. Also it is used to discuss the relations between political leaders and bureaucrats and scientists in terms of shared social backgrounds and experiences and, in this case, the characteristics of the appraiser. But the problem is more subtle than this, and not only because of the heavy involvement of expatriate professionals. Is the attached RRA more likely to establish a problematic which has not been defined externally to the knowledge on which it depends? Does attached RRA have a greater potential for

initiating a policy proposal rather than simply responding to it? Is unattached RRA, especially where green expatriates are involved, easily restricted to a *post hoc* ideological function, having its horizons, its terrain of concern, determined in advance? There are two problems here: first, that appraisals are typically constructed around a project initiative; and secondly, that initiative is the outcome of a political process reflecting configurations of class interests (national and sometimes international).

Unattached RRA therefore conflates the social and scientific issues. Without resort to organised knowledge established externally, and prior to the appraisal activity, the appraisal's critical function is limited. Furthermore it is likely to be empirically restricted since the criteria of relevant data/indicators are established by the elements of the project or policy initiative—involving both conceptual and spatial constraints. The possibility is lost of providing a meaning for data which is both local and immediately related to the project elements, by determining its position in the social formation as a whole. This is a context (both social and scientific) which would of course, include the interests of the policy-makers themselves. A clear example of this problem are cooperative programmes, which are typically examined in terms of cooperative membership and the analysis of cooperative activity (defined in the objectives section of the project document). Sometimes a control group of non-members is included. But cooperatives usually represent a small proportion of the structures in which rural individuals interact, and how they behave in those cooperatives will be determined by their position in other structures, which must therefore also be investigated. It is narcissistic only to select that behaviour for appraisal which apparently relates to one's own invention! Those comments then lead me to the proposition that the more unattached the RRA, the less it is autonomous of political direction or ideological hegemony, and therefore, its cooptation role is increased (Selznich 1966) and its critical functions reduced along with the *scientific* value of the appraisal. In this situation, a divergence exists between the scientific and social value of the activity, whereas the objective is presumably to achieve a convergence.

### **Harnessing Existing Knowledge**

This problem of divergence requires long term as well as short term solutions. The danger with academic discussion is that RRA as an unattached activity becomes institutionalised precisely because it is being discussed and papers written on it, and precisely because we all recognise with regret the paucity of organised knowledge around the issues of rural development which concern us. Thus part of the response to the social and scientific difficulties posed

by unattached RRA must be to envisage its disappearance as a category of research, by addressing our talents and capacity for persuasion to the creation of more systematic rural research. The resources currently devoted to this both internationally and in poor countries remain pitiful and very *ad hoc*. But leaving utopias aside, it is also necessary to harness existing knowledge, however haphazardly organised and poorly planned it may be, as a basis for establishing the category of attached RRA. The point here is that RRAs are a predictable part of any rural planning process (although content and type of personnel involved would vary between regimes—eg self-appraisal activities of pre-communes in post-revolution China), so that its inclusion can actually be planned by organising the research base for such activity. In Bangladesh, for example, I have recently been advocating a regional zoning exercise where rural case-studies (not of 'villages' necessarily, but also of processes, dominant physical or historical characteristics etc) would be strategically encouraged and sponsored to provide the basis on which RRAs could be conducted (involving local executive staff and potential production groups in initiating as well as responding roles). It is not necessary to envisage large numbers of such casestudies, but to consider carefully where rural research should be undertaken.

Perhaps Bangladesh is an extreme example, but the spatial distribution of its research activity has been largely unplanned—initially a high proportion in the Comilla region because of the pilot project, but elsewhere quite random—dependent upon the whims of foreign researchers and agencies, the site of Universities and (critically) access to Dacca. And until 1975 there were very few nationals involved in this research except for the Comilla Academy staff, whose work was very positivist and guided by hypotheses concocted on the Michigan State University campus. The entire rural planning in Bangladesh involving hundreds of RRAs has had to take place on the basis of a handful of village studies and some crude, ill-informed and unreliable agro-economic surveys.

Of course the mere existence of prior organised knowledge is not a sufficient condition for successfully attached RRAs. The knowledge has to be accessible and intelligible to appraisers and planners. It is desirable that a cadre of national researchers/appraisers be developed who are placed in a continuous, dynamic interaction both with the rural material and the planning process of an early stage of policy formulation as well as throughout. In this process, indicators would become progressively established and appraisal activity more routinised—with attached RRAs/formal methods as the final outcome?

## Conclusion

In the meantime short-term solutions to this problem of divergence between the social and the scientific value of RRA are sought, even at the risk of lending respectability to an imperfect activity. This explains the emphasis here and in previous discussions on RRA upon issues of method and the relationship of appraisal/appraiser to the project/policy and its sponsors. However, this abbreviated paper has identified the extent to which my and other contributions under both of those headings are lending support to the ideology of rational planning and has succeeded in specifying the categories of activity which give the lie to it. Finally it would not be appropriate to diffuse my message by repeating my previous attempts to make positive suggestions concerning methods. Instead I offer an appendix which describes my approach to rapid village-study work in the mid-1970s in Bangladesh.

## References

- Halfpenny, P., 1979, 'The Analysis of Qualitative Data', *Sociological Review*, November
- Selznich, P., 1966, *TVA and the Grassroots*, Part 3 and conclusion

## Appendix

### Case study of Bondokgram village in the Comilla District of Bangladesh, October 1974 - January 1975

This work was undertaken as part of a consultancy to the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) and involved a rapid study of two villages to assess the relation between the BARD programme and the rural power structure. As an example of RRA it is probably longer than the normal RRA duration but it does reveal schematically the relation between objectives, hypotheses formulation, methodology and analysis. What follows is an extract from *Exploitation and the Rural Poor*, the book published by BARD as a result of this work.

## Objectives

This proposal set out the following objectives for the research. They were not all achieved by our preliminary studies.

1. A description of the structures and networks of domination in the rural social formation. In addition to overt political institutions like the sardar, reyai, samaj, Union Parishad and political parties, an examination of other institutions and relationships, through which power is exercised, for example: tenancy, labour, moneylending, the market, lineage

status, patron-clients dyads, the cooperative, the system of access to public resources and justice, and straightforward coercion.

2. The impact of the introduction of HYVs and associated technology upon both the structure of political action and the process of group formation. In particular the pattern of recruitment to political groups and a hypothesised shift toward groups based on shared economic interest and ideological cohesion, that is, the process of class differentiation. Furthermore, the nature of rural-urban alliances through respective classes with complimentary interests.
3. The socio-political constraints for a cooperative strategy to be identified. A description of alternative forms of cooperation—both historical and contemporary—and discussion of their significance for HYV programmes, especially those which involve the provision of large scale indivisible inputs (lumpy) and relationships of mutual dependence between households, lineages and reyais.
4. The organisational capacities of different classes: the respective position of different classes in the mode of production is of great significance in enabling a class to develop a viable consciousness. To what extent can the poor peasantry and landless labourers sustain relationships which are spatially adequate eg through geographical mobility, kinship and marriage, market interaction, freedom from physical labour, etc to compete with richer peasants? Assuming desirability, can a detailed behavioural analysis of relationships produce possible strategies which would assist the rural poor to cooperate with one another? If cooperation is good for the powerful (the *de facto* situation for many cooperatives), then it is certainly beneficial to the weak.
5. The relationships of access between the peasantry and administration: where the development of a country depends heavily on the bureaucratic allocation of critical investment resources, then the institutions through which these resources are channelled have to be examined for the extent of intrusion by the rural power structure. In particular, a contrast has to be drawn between institutions through which peasants traditionally obtain resources (eg patrons, kin, moneylenders, transactions with urban-based entrepreneurs) and bureaucratic institutions which operate by different rules, procedures, criteria and objectives which are not familiar to the peasant, cannot be trusted and whose outcomes cannot be safely predicted.

6. While the study intends to progress beyond the familiar conclusions of HYV programmes and polarisation, it is necessary to describe such tendencies, particularly in terms of diversification by richer peasants (as opposed to landlords) into non agricultural activities—money-lending, primary processing, shopkeeping, market manipulation (hoarding, go-down, transportation).
7. With the above concerns the study should also be in a position to pass some comment on additional possible strategies: a more thoroughgoing land reform, collectivisation, communes; and the way the nature of the state can assist or inhibit both existing and alternative strategies. It is unrealistic to exclude from the analysis the relationship between the rural power structure and the state.

### **Methodology**

The methodology of fieldwork was the same for the two case studies. It was decided early on that the type of data in which we were interested required that the fieldworker must also be the author of his village monograph. This is of course normal practice for most anthropological research. Secondly, although there was insufficient time for proper anthropological fieldwork, we attempted to maintain as much of the anthropological method as was possible, by participating in unstructured conversations, recording genealogies, cross-checking information, establishing close contact with strategic information and so on.

But thirdly, since we had to generate data quickly, we used a two stage sampling of informants from whom we obtained structured items of data. The first stage was a 40 per cent random sample of the village households—for these households we recorded census and land characteristics, marriage patterns, occupations, and some estimate of the subsistence rating. Normally this information would be obtained for all the households, but time prevented us. The second stage was a 20 per cent purposive sample of village households stratified by the 'para' distribution of the

population and the distribution of effective land-holding. This was a very detailed checklist and appears with the first stage census proforma in the appendix to this volume.

In each stage, especially the second, the selected households were regarded as informants rather than as one-off interviews. Contact was maintained with them throughout the period of fieldwork. Thus information was obtained on different occasions, often stimulated by the observation of behaviour and ongoing events. Since the data were mainly preoccupied with relationships, descriptions of actual pieces of interaction were collected and recorded. The participants to the interaction outside the informant household were contacted where possible and asked to give their version of the relationship. Where other villages were involved eg through marriage, then names, distances and characteristics of that village or town were recorded to establish the spatial and structural nature of the network. The strategy, in short, was to construct a network of relationships within the village and outside it via a proportional number of random entry points into the system.

With the constraint of time on the one hand (2½ months for fieldwork) and the requirement of detail on the other, the main emphasis had to be put on village level methodology. However, the analysis by no means had to be exclusively confined to the village. It was intended to obtain a detailed profile of the interaction between village institutions and the region. The strategy was to produce a picture of the extended nature of the rural political system by intensifying the network and 'fields' of relationships in which different classes and groups of villagers are involved—both in the village and outside it. At this stage, the study was not concerned with the quantitative measurement of transactions and exchanges, but rather with their description and a qualitative interpretation of them. Nevertheless data on land-holding, income, expenditure, debts, inputs, investment patterns, wages, prices, etc were collected to provide an illustration of the intensity of the relationship.