
Editorial

All planners are faced with the problem of obtaining accurate and relevant information about those for whom they plan. They usually have two alternatives: they can get in their jeeps and go to see for themselves, or they can refer to the reports of academic or government surveys written after prolonged investigation in rural areas by investigators and their enumerators who, at best, have only general, not specific, policy purposes in mind.

Either method can be inappropriate. The brief foray by the urban professional who does not leave tarmac roads and talks chiefly to local leaders can be seriously misleading, and may only serve to legitimate decisions already half-made—just *happening* to turn up facts which give a good prognosis for the investigator's pet project. The larger general survey, on the other hand, can be full of enormous quantities of data, none of them relevant to the planner's particular purpose—or to the likely purposes of most other planners. It may well be out of date because of the scale of the survey and the time taken to process the data.

Either way there is a danger that the information relied on will be appropriate neither in depth nor in timeliness. It is likely, too, to be biased, by pre-occupations, by professional rigidities, by the very fact that it is collected in such a 'top down' manner by middle-class professional outsiders. In the case of rapid data gathering, the biases are several and have been described by Chambers (1980). They tend to direct outsiders towards the less poor and more influential in rural areas and lead to a misperception of the degree and causes of poverty. First, visitors tend to remain in urban areas or travel predominantly along tarmac roads where the better off reside. They usually visit project areas rather than areas which are not receiving injections of funds: the rural people they meet are the rich and local leaders, men rather than women, and the fit and healthy rather than the non-active. Visitors also tend to travel in the dry season which, as the post-harvest period, is the time when life is more pleasant, disease incidence is lower and work is usually less arduous. Finally convention and courtesy usually deter outsiders from enquiring about and meeting poorer people. It is easy to see how these biases interlock so that the poor and deprived are overlooked and how these rapid exercises can often be misleading, particularly if the intention is to find out about poor people.

However, slow data gathering too suffers from its own set of biases and perceptions. These exercises aim at finding out 'the facts', irrespective of the time it takes, although they will often be bounded by one agricultural year or cropping season. They meet statistical standards of appropriate sampling, methods and sample size: if they emanate from a university department, the method of investigation is strongly determined by the conventions of Western intellectual disciplines. And, notwithstanding their longer time perspective, they can still suffer from the biases suffered by the rapid investigator and described in the previous paragraph. Such surveys do not always provide information of direct use to planners and even if the data are processed and written up, they can be too out of date to be useful. Therefore these 'slow' investigations, although professionally respectable, are often inefficient. It is not the intention here to make value judgments about the relative merits of quick or slow appraisals: the criterion should be whether they are cost effective in terms of relevance, timeliness, accuracy and usefulness.

The articles in this *Bulletin* examine how lessons can be drawn from these short and long methods to improve both, but particularly the more rapid assessments. These are very commonly used in developing countries with their heavy dependence on progress in the rural sector and the increasing role of governments and outside agencies in rural development. 'Rapid Rural Appraisal' (RRA) is used throughout in a broad sense, not limited to project appraisal, but covering assessment of rural living conditions and social organisation, monitoring and evaluation, and both as a tool to formulate long-term government policy and to deal with emergencies. Most of these articles are revised versions of papers given at a Conference on RRA at the IDS in December 1979, organised by Robert Chambers¹. At this conference over forty papers on various aspects were presented, including natural resources and environmental appraisal, health and nutrition, project identification and appraisal, appraisal for agricultural research and social stratification. Other papers examined the role of statisticians, the perceptions of outside investigators and the ideology of rapid appraisals.

This *Bulletin* devotes itself broadly to those papers which discuss aspects of social structure and rural

¹A general discussion of the findings of the Conference is contained in Chambers (1980).

economy.² drawing on the experience from both rapid appraisals and longer term research to suggest how social relations and rural employment, in their broadest sense, might be better understood. It addresses itself to four main issues: the biases of outside observers and the extent to which they impose their own prejudices: the nature of cost effectiveness in data collection and the trade-offs between quantity of data, relevance, accuracy, timeliness and cost: the identification of those not normally considered in appraisals, especially women: and finally the methods which might be used in rapid appraisals to understand and take account of social relations in a more routine way—as is the case in longer term research.

The first article discusses the context in which RRA is usually carried out. Wood argues that the prior existence of relevant organised information is a critical determinant of the nature of the appraisal, and that RRA, not only because of its time constraints, all too often performs a legitimating function for decisions already taken by the predominating class group. In order to resolve the divergence between the social and scientific value of RRA, he suggests that RRAs might be distinguished by their relationship to existing knowledge (which he categorises as relatively attached or unattached) and the extent of formal method involved. In a case study from Bangladesh he outlines an approach to RRA with these concepts in mind.

Richards shares Wood's concern about the role of sponsors and the positivist nature of RRA. He argues however that long term social surveys are often no more unbiased than RRA yet the latter can be used more flexibly. This can allow the use of local knowledge and reduce the 'top down' nature of investigation. Belshaw's article is the third on the scientific context of RRA: he provides a guide to the theory and principles of data economising. He uses the Popper model of error reduction in public sector decision-making and the principles of cybernetics as a framework for selecting data-economising procedures for development planning.

The remaining articles deal directly with experience from long term research (Longhurst in Northern Nigeria, Howes in Bangladesh, Moore in Sri Lanka) and project appraisals (Palmer). A further case study of an appraisal of a cotton project in The Gambia is provided by an ODA Food Strategy Team.

Longhurst carried out a long term rural economy survey and draws on this and various qualitative

surveys to discuss means of improving RRA in Northern Nigeria as well as simplifying longer term investigations. In a frank discussion of his research methodology, Howes describes various methods of stratifying a sample. One conclusion from these two papers is that some enquiries can only be carried out by long term research and are not amenable to rapid means. Palmer shows that women are generally 'invisible' and the conceptual framework for their participation on development projects is weak. She goes on to discuss the methods of project appraisal teams and shows the importance of women's issues for successful project formulation and implementation.

Moore demonstrates succinctly that if the 'tarmac' bias operates in quick appraisals, then the poor are not seen. He also describes the use of housing standards as socioeconomic indicators. Finally a brief description of the methodology of the appraisal of the Gambian Cotton Project emphasises the need to be thoroughly briefed with existing information and to observe local courtesies in order to generate rapport with respondents.

A great deal still needs to be understood about effective data collection for rural development and about using the most effective techniques. The articles in this Bulletin open up the subject for discussion and attempt both to draw some general conclusions and to present specific case studies.

It is not the intention to suggest that all information gathering exercises are either very short or very long. Some lie in the middle but because they fall between two professional stools they are relatively rare. Also, some investigations can only be carried out over a long period where no short cuts are feasible: others are amenable to short periods. It is not a matter of 'either/or', and the various methods should be regarded as complementary. We should be clear, therefore, about which set of rural processes should be assigned to which category of investigation.

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References

Chambers, R., 1980. 'Rapid Rural Appraisal: Rationale and Repertoire'. IDS Discussion Paper 155, September, Sussex

²A set of papers on agriculture is to be published in a forthcoming issue of *Agricultural Administration*. These papers concern the investigation of natural resources and their utilisation, the appraisal of local conditions and farming systems, the identification of priorities and programmes for agricultural research and farmer innovation, and project identification. The papers on health and nutrition are being considered for publication by the World Health Organisation.