

pmil at V ARRA. doc 1100 22 April 91

RAPID AND PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL:

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

(updated 22 April 1991)

Robert Chambers

## Contents

Introduction

RRA: origins and evolution

Principles of RRA

The Menu of RRA Methods

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

- i. villagers' capabilities
- ii. the primacy of rapport
- iii. visual sharing
- iv. sequences
- v. training and reorientation for outsiders
- vi. sharing and spread

Dangers

Potentials

Appendix: Sources and Contacts

---

## Introduction

To give a historical perspective, this paper starts with rapid rural appraisal (RRA); but the cutting edge in this family of approaches and methods has, in the early 1990s, moved on from the "rapid" to "relaxed", and especially to "participatory". Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) is considered in the later part of this paper. The basic principles of RRA still apply with PRA but have been extended.

## RRA: origins and evolution

The philosophy, approaches and methods now known as rapid rural appraisal (RRA) began to coalesce in the late 1970s. There was growing awareness both of the biases of rural development tourism - the phenomenon of the brief rural visit by the urban-based professional, and of the costs, inaccuracies and delays of large-scale questionnaire surveys. More cost-effective methods were sought for outsiders to learn about rural people and conditions.

In those days most professionals were reluctant to write and publish about the "informal" methods they invented and used. They feared for their professional credibility. They felt compelled to conform to standard

statistical norms, however costly and crude their application. In the 1980s, though, RRA's own principles and rigour became more evident. As the 1980s began, RRA was argued to be cost-effective, especially for gaining timely information, but still with some sense that it might be a secondbest. But by the end of the 1980s, the RRA approach and methods were more and more eliciting a range and quality of information and insights inaccessible with more traditional methods. To my surprise, wherever RRA was tested against more conventional methods, it came out better. In many contexts and for many purposes, RRA, when well done,

showed itself to be not a second best but a best.

2

In establishing the principles and methods of RRA many people and institutions took part. An incomplete listing of countries where they were developed is Australia, Bangladesh, Benin, Colombia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Perhaps more than any other movement, agroecosystem analysis, pioneered in Southeast Asia by Gordon Conway and others at the University of Chiang Mai and elsewhere, established new methods and credibility. The University of Khon Kaen in Thailand became world leader in developing theory and methods, especially for multidisciplinary teams, and in institutionalising RRA as a part of professional training. In health and nutrition, a parallel and overlapping movement, drawing on social anthropology, was evolved in the 1980s under the rubric Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) (Scrimshaw and Hurtado 1987) and practised in at least 20 countries. Now, as we enter the 1990s, "hard" journals regularly publish articles on RRA. The problem now is not just to gain wider acceptance for RRA and its development PRA, but also to assure and enhance quality, so that what is done is done well, and better and better.

#### Principles of RRA

Different practitioners would list different principles, but most would agree to include the following:

- optimising trade-offs, relating the costs of learning to the useful truth of information, with trade-offs between quantity, relevance, accuracy and timeliness. This includes the principles of optimal ignorance - knowing what it is not worth knowing, and of appropriate imprecision - not measuring more precisely than needed.
- offsetting biases, especially those of rural development tourism, by being relaxed and not rushing, listening not lecturing, probing instead of passing on to the next topic, being unimposing instead of important, and seeking out the poorer people and what concerns them
- triangulating, meaning using more than one, and often three, methods or sources of information to crosscheck
- learning from and with rural people, directly, on the site, and face-to-face, gaining from indigenous physical, technical and social knowledge
- learning rapidly and progressively, with conscious exploration, flexible use of methods, opportunism, improvisation, iteration, and crosschecking, not following a blueprint programme but adapting in a learning process.

#### The Menu of RRA Methods

In its early days, RRA seemed little more than organised commonsense. During the 1980s, though, much creative ingenuity was applied and more methods invented. A summary listing of headings can give some indication of the types of methods now known, without being exhaustive:

- secondary data review
- direct observation, including wandering around
- DIY (doing-it-yourself, taking part in activities)
- key informants
- semi-structured interviews
- group interviews and discussions
- chains (sequences) of interviews
- key indicators
- workshops and brainstorming
- transects and group walks

- mapping, modelling and aerial photographs
- diagramming
- wealth ranking
- other ranking and scoring
- quantification
- ethnohistories and trend analysis
- time lines (chronologies of events)
- stories, portraits and case studies
- team management and interactions
- key probes
- short, simple questionnaires, late in the RRA process
- rapid report writing in the field

3

Diagramming and ranking have provided some of the less obvious methods. Diagramming has come to include many topics, aspects and techniques, such as transects, seasonalities, spatial and social relations, institutions, trends, and ecological history. Ranking methods have been evolved to elicit people's own criteria and judgements. An ingenious and simple example is wealth ranking, in the most common version of which respondents are presented with slips of paper, one for each household in a community, and asked to place them in piles according to their wealth or poverty. These and other methods have been modified and developed, and more will be invented in coming years.

#### Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

RRA began as a better way for outsiders to learn. In answering the question - whose knowledge counts? - it sought to enable outsiders to learn from rural people, and to make use of indigenous technical knowledge to assist outsiders' analysis. Its mode was mainly extractive, the knowledge of rural people counted, but for our use. But in participatory rural appraisal (PRA), knowledge is articulated and generated in more participatory ways, in which interviewing, investigation, transects, mapping, diagramming, presentation and analysis are carried out more by rural people themselves, in which they "own" more of the information, and in which they identify the priorities.

PRA is, then, a new form of RRA which has more and more shifted the initiative from outsider to villager. It has developed rapidly, and this summary probably omits much that has been happening in parallel in different parts of the world. PRA has several antecedents, and draws on several traditions, including the community development of the 1950s and 1960s, the dialogics and conscientisation of Paulo Freire, participatory action research, and the work of activist NGOs in many parts of the world

which have encouraged poor people to undertake their own analysis and action. The term PRA was probably first used in Kenya to describe village-level investigations, analysis and planning undertaken by the National Environment Secretariat in conjunction with Clark University, USA, and PRA has been spreading in Kenya. PRA was introduced into India in a joint exercise of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and the International Institute for Environment and Development in 1988. Since then, it has evolved and spread rapidly in the NGO sector in India, with MYRADA, based in Bangalore, taking a leading role, together with AKRSP, Action Aid and others. The participatory orientation of PRA has given new impetus to the development of methods, contributing to an explosion of inventive activity in India and Nepal in the past year. One of the delights of PRA has been the lack of blueprint, and the encouragement to outsiders and villagers alike to improvise in a spirit of play.

Reviewing an astonishing year and a half of innovation by colleagues in India and Nepal, I see six points standing out as "discoveries", at least for me.

#### 1. villagers' capabilities

Villagers have shown greater capacity to map, model, quantify and estimate, rank, score and diagram than I had supposed.

Participatory mapping and modelling have been the most striking finding. The literature on mental maps has been largely based on urban people in the North whose mental maps are quite limited. It seems that villagers in the South have much more extensive and detailed mental maps, and given the right conditions, can express this visibly on the ground or on paper, either as maps or as three-dimensional models (for example of watersheds). They have now created many (hundreds in India) of such maps and models, usually showing the huts and houses in a village (a social map) and/or the surrounding village area (a resources map). Most recently they have been indicating social details, using seeds, colour codes, and markers such as bhandis (the small spots women place on their foreheads), to indicate for each household, the numbers of men, women, and children, wealth/poverty, the handicapped, immunisation status, education, and much else. With an informed group or person, a census of a small village can be conducted in a fraction of an hour, and much other information added by "interviewing the map".

Similarly, with quantification, estimating, ranking, scoring and diagramming, when the methods and materials are right, villagers have shown themselves capable of generating and analysing information beyond normal professional expectations. The fixation of professionals that only "we" can count and measure has tended to obscure the capacities of rural people themselves. Normal professionalism also values absolute as against relative or comparative quantification, and identifies trends and changes by comparing measurements at different points of time. This is often unnecessary. For practical purposes directions of change, and rough proportions of change, are often all that are needed; and using PRA methods, these can be indicated by villagers without measuring absolute values. Various methods of ranking, and more recently of scoring, have also proved powerful sources of insight.

In all this, the methods and materials have been important in enabling villagers' capabilities to be expressed, but methods in themselves are not enough.

#### ii. the primacy of rapport

The key to facilitating such participation is rapport. At first sight, it is a mystery why it has taken until 1990 to "discover" the richness of the knowledge, creativity and analytical capacity in villagers. But when the widespread beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of outsiders are considered, there is little mystery. Outsiders have been conditioned to believe and assume that villagers are ignorant, and have either lectured them, holding sticks and wagging fingers, or have interviewed them, asking rapid question, interrupting, and not listening beyond immediate replies. "Our" lecturing and interviewing are much of the problem. The ignorance of rural people is then an artifact of our ignorance of how to enable them to express, share and extend their knowledge. The attitudes and behaviour needed for rapport have been missing. These include:

- \* participation by the outsider
- \* respect for the villager
- \* interest in what villagers have to say and show
- \* patience, wandering around, not rushing, and not interrupting
- \* humility
- \* materials and methods which empower villagers to express and analyse their knowledge

#### iii. visual sharing

Visual sharing is a common element in much PRA. With a questionnaire survey, information is transferred from the words of the person

interviewed to the paper of the questionnaire schedule where it becomes a possession of the interviewer. The learning is one-off. The information becomes personal and private, owned by the interviewer and unverified. In contrast, with visual sharing of a map, model, diagram, or units (stones, seeds, small fruits etc) used for quantification, ranking or scoring, all who are present can see, point to, discuss, manipulate and alter physical objects or representations. Triangulation and crosschecking take place. The learning is progressive. The information is visible and public, added to, owned and verified by participants.

For example, in participatory mapping and modelling, villagers draw and model their villages and resources, deciding what to include, and debating, adding and modifying detail. Everyone can see what is being "said" because it is being "done". In shared diagramming, information is diagrammed to represent, for example, seasonal changes in dimensions such as rainfall, agricultural labour, income, indebtedness, food supply and migration. Paper can be used for diagrams, but the ground and other local materials have the advantage of being "theirs", media which villagers can command and alter with confidence.

#### iv. sequences

Some of the participatory methods have been known and used in the past (Rhoades 1990). There are now some new ones, but perhaps more striking is the power of combinations and sequences. To take some examples:

- \* with participatory mapping, villagers draw not one, but several maps, successively becoming more detailed and useful.

- \* social mapping provides a basis for household listings, and for indicating population, social group, health and other household characteristics, and is a useful stage in most topic PRAs.

- \* transects are planned using a participatory map, leading naturally into villagers acting as guides for outsiders.

- \* wealth ranking follows easily and well from a village social map which provides an up-to-date household listing.

- \* with matrix ranking, eliciting a villager's criteria of goodness and badness of a class of things (trees, vegetables, fodder grasses, varieties of a crop or animal, sources of credit, market outlets, fuel types...) leads into discussion of preferences and actions.

- \* with a transect, observation and discussion lead into the identification of problems and opportunities, and discussions of what might be done and by whom.

- \* in a group interview, key informants are identified for further discussions.

In such ways as these, participatory methods fit well with a flexible learning process approach which is more open-ended and adaptable than most earlier RRA.

#### v. training and reorientation for outsiders

RRA training conducted in Thailand in 1990 took six weeks, which was considered inadequate. Much PRA training in India has been taking from three to five days. This usually entails a team camping in a village, learning and using various methods, all as part of a participatory process which leads to identifying actions by and with villagers. Staying a number of nights in the village intensifies and concentrates the experience. Attention is paid to outsiders' attitudes and behaviour. Villagers are encouraged to map, diagram, participate in transects, and plan. The aim of the training for the outsiders is to facilitate changes

6  
in perception and action, listening not lecturing, learning progressively, embracing error, being critically self-aware, and themselves participating, for example reversing roles by being taught by villagers to perform village tasks. For some outsiders, especially those who have had a very strict normal professional training, no significant change may take place. For some, though, there opens up a new range of possibilities and a sense of freedom to experiment and innovate. It is then not necessary to be trained in all the methods. They can be tried, improvised and adapted subsequently, and new ones can be invented. The outsider's creativity is released, as well as that of the villager.

#### vi. sharing and spread

PRA in practice has three foundations: behaviour and attitudes; methods; and sharing. At first, the methods appeared the most important foundation; then the behaviour and attitudes of outsiders were seen as primary, especially for rapport; and now the third foundation, sharing, is rising in its relative importance. This is partly because it has become the mode in which PRA spreads. PRA in India has a culture of sharing which owes much to MYRADA but also to other NGOs. Village camps have been open to people from other organisations. Typically, a training camp organised by an NGO will include not just its own staff but also people from other NGOs and from government. Sharing is part of the experience of the camp: sharing of information by villagers, presenting it to each other and to outsiders; sharing of ideas and experience concerning approaches and methods; sharing of self-critical appraisal of the process among

colleagues; and sharing of food between outsiders and villagers who have been participating.

If PRA is spreading through the sharing of experience and mutual learning, it is also taking different forms in different places. People and organisations are inventing their own variants. Some emphasise one set of methods; some another. Any one method - transects, or wealth ranking for example - is done differently in different places. Interchanges, with staff of one organisation spending time with other organisations in their PRAs, mean that ideas are continuously picked up and developed. Creativity and inventiveness, too, on the part of villagers, come into play.

#### Dangers

RRA and PRA face dangers.

The first danger is faddism. Like farming systems research, RRA and PRA could be discredited by over-rapid adoption and misuse, and by sticking on labels without substance. The warning signs are there: demand for training which exceeds by far the competent trainers available; requirements that consultants "use RRA" or perhaps now "use PRA" and then consultants who say they will do so, when they do not know what RRA or PRA entail, or have only read about them, not experienced and used them; and the belief that good RRA or PRA are simple and easy, quick fixes, when they are not.

A second danger is rushing. The word "rapid", necessary in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is now a liability, in danger of being used to legitimate biased rural development tourism, when really the R of RRA should stand for "relaxed", allowing plenty of time. One danger here is that hurry or lack of commitment will mean that the poorest are, once again, neither seen, listened to, nor learnt from, when much of the rationale for RRA/PRA is to make time to find the poorest, to learn from them, and to empower them.

A third danger is formalism. With any innovation, there is an urge to standardise and codify, often in the name of quality. Farming systems research, and some variants of RRA, have given rise to heavy manuals.

7

These then become a problem, blocking innovation and spread. The lack of a manual for PRA in India has been much of its strength, for would-be practitioners have been forced to learn, not from books, and not by rote, but from colleagues, through sharing, and from their own experiences. Many of the best innovations have come from practitioners not following established methods. Manuals can be useful sources of ideas, especially for trainers. But they should not be allowed to inhibit, or to transfer responsibility from an individual practitioner to an external authority. Practitioners must feel free to start, to make mistakes, and to learn on the run. It is not books of instructions, but personal commitment, critical awareness, and informed improvisation, which assure quality and creativity.

#### Potentials

Despite these dangers, the long-term potentials of both normal RRA and of its newer form in PRA, seem vast. Except perhaps for Thailand, RRA has been adopted only on a small, localised, scale. We are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. But already an RRA approach and methods have been used for appraisal and analysis in many subject areas. These include

agroecosystems; natural resources, forestry and the environment; irrigation; technology and innovation; health and nutrition; farming systems research and extension; pastoralism; marketing; disaster relief; organisations; social, cultural and economic conditions; and many special topics. Many other applications can be expected, urban as well as rural, and in the North as well as the South.

Much of the future would seem to lie with PRA. It has several strong points. By transferring the initiative to rural people, it generates rapport, and forces outsiders to learn. It elicits, presents and crosschecks much information in little time. And it is usually full of surprises, different each time, and interesting and enjoyable for all concerned. Moreover, through encouraging rural people to present and analyse what they know, it can generate commitment to sustainable action, as it has done in both Kenya and India. Increasingly in India, NGOs are adopting the PRA approach and methods as part of the process of identifying development actions by and with villagers, in domains which include watershed management, social forestry, credit, horticulture, and marketing cooperative development. The PRA approach and methods appear versatile and adaptable, and other applications can be expected. PRA also enhances capabilities. It can entail not just shared knowledge, but also shared analysis, creativity and commitment.

In addition, for the 1990s, three potentials stand out.

First, RRA/PRA has to date still made rather little impression in universities and training institutes. Universities in Thailand are exceptions, making it important to learn why. In India, in the early 1990s, it is key training institutions rather than universities which are starting to adopt and develop PRA, especially for the village fieldwork of their students, liberating them from the slavery of the survey questionnaire. These include the National Academy of Administration at Mussoorie, the National Forest Academy at Dehra Dun, the Institute of Rural Management at Anand, the Indian Institute of Forest Management at Bhopal, and the Xavier Institute of Social Service at Ranchi. Only when many more universities and other tertiary institutions for education and training employ RRA and PRA, and when a new generation of professionals is well versed in their philosophy and methods, will they finally and securely take root. The potential for applications in training and education remains enormous and still largely unrecognised.

Second, all too often senior officials and academics who pronounce and prescribe on rural development lack recent direct knowledge, and base their analysis and action on ignorance or on personal experience which is decades out of date. RRA/PRA can bring them face-to-face with rural



people. Mini-sabbaticals in villages for senior officials are being discussed, and experience to date in India has been that they appreciate PRA and take to it well, if suitably introduced. PRA experiences can help them to keep in contact and up to date and to correct error. It can provide learning which is intellectually exciting, practically relevant, and often fun.

Third, PRA supports decentralisation and diversity, allowing and enabling local people to take command of their resources and to determine what fits their needs. By involving them from the very beginning of a development action, it should enable them to own it more and should contribute to commitment and sustainability. It is part of the paradigm for rural development which stresses process, participation, local knowledge, and reversals of learning. Nothing in rural development is ever a panacea, and PRA faces problems of spread, scale and quality assurance. But for

the 1990s and beyond, it does present promise. To make the 1990s a decade of local empowerment and diversity, participatory rural appraisal could have a key part to play.

22 April 1991

Robert Chambers  
Administrative Staff College of India  
Bellavista  
Hyderabad 500 049  
India

Note: This is an updated and expanded revision of a paper originally published in Appropriate Technology vol 16 number 4, March 1990 pp 14 - 16, and then revised for a seminar at the University of Chiang Mai, Thailand on 23 November 1990.

#### Appendix: Sources and Contacts

\* = to the best of my knowledge available free on request from the Sustainable Agriculture Programme, International Institute for Environment and Development, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD

Much of the now large literature on rapid and participatory rural appraisal is grey and ephemeral, but the sources recommended below include some of the more accessible.

#### For RRA:

Early publications on RRA available in some libraries include Agricultural Administration vol 8 no 6, 1981; and Richard Longhurst ed. Rapid Rural Appraisal: Social Structure and Rural Economy, IDS Bulletin vol 12 no 4, 1981.

The best wide-ranging introductions to RRA are:

Khon Kaen University, 1987 Proceedings of the 1985 International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal, Rural Systems Research and Farming Systems Research Projects, Khon Kaen, Thailand, University of Khon Kaen, Thailand

\* Jennifer McCracken, Jules Pretty and Gordon Conway 1988 An Introduction to Rapid Rural Appraisal for Agricultural Development, IIED

Both these publications have bibliographies.

#### For RAP:

Susan Scribshaw and Elena Hurtado, 1987 Rapid Assessment Procedures for Nutrition and Primary Health Care: anthropological approaches to improving programme effectiveness, UNU Tokyo, UNICEF, and University of California Latin American Center, University of California, Los Angeles. Write to UCLA.

#### For PRA:

Robert Rhoades 1990 "The Coming Revolution in Methods for Rural Development Research", User's Perspective Network (UPWARD), International Potato Center (CIP), P.O.Box 933, Manila, Philippines is a thoughtful and provocative paper, which indicates some origins of the PRA approach and methods. Write to UPWARD.

\* Charity Kabutha and Richard Ford "Using RRA to Formulate a Village Resources Management Plan, Mbusanyi, Kenya", in RRA Notes 2, October 1988 pp.4-11

\* Jennifer McCracken, Participatory Rural Appraisal in Gujarat: a trial model for the Aas Khan Rural Support Programme (India), IIED, London 1988

\* An Introduction to Participatory Rural Appraisal for Rural Resources

Management. Programme for international Development, Clark University, Worcester, Mass, USA and National Environment Secretariat, Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, Nairobi, Kenya, November 1989

\* PRA Handbook. from the same programme in Kenya, a larger and longer version, available from IIED

\* A series of R/PRA handbooks are being prepared by IIED and should be available free later in 1991. These promise to be an invaluable source of ideas and shared experience.

To keep up with developments:

As we enter the 1990s, developments in rapid and participatory rural appraisal have themselves become rapid. The two best sources for keeping up are:

1. \* PRA Notes. IIED

2. The PALM/PRA Series free on request from MYRADA, 2 Service Road, Domlur Layout, Bangalore 560 071, India. PALM = participatory learning methods. The series already includes issues on participatory mapping, interviewing, enhancing participation in PRA, and other practical experience and advice. I recommend this series especially for those interested in recent practical aspects of PRA.

To gain direct experience:

Action Aid, P.B. 5406, 3 Resthouse Road (next to Lumbini Apartments), Bangalore 560001, India is a clearing house for information about PRA in India. This includes forthcoming village camps. I warmly recommend any reader, whether from India or abroad, who wants to find out more through a direct PRA experience, to make contact with Action Aid, and to try to get a place to take part in a camp. Let me finally hope that those organisations which are competent and willing to organise such camps and to welcome others to them, will continue to be generous and sharing, so that more and more people can make their own informed judgements and decisions about PRA, and adopt and adapt it if they wish.

**RAPID AND PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL :**

**PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

**(Updated 22 April 1991)**

**Robert Chambers**

## INTRODUCTION

## CONTENTS

### Introduction

### RRA : origins and evolution

### Principles of RRA

## RRA : ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

### The Menu of RRA Methods

### Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

- i. villagers' capabilities
- ii. the primacy of rapport
- iii. visual sharing
- iv. Sequence
- v. training and reorientation for outsiders
- vi. sharing and spread

### Dangers

### Potentials

### Appendix : Sources and Contacts

## INTRODUCTION

To give a historical perspective, this paper starts with rapid rural appraisal (RRA); but the cutting edge in this family of approaches and methods has, in the early 1990s, moved on from the "rapid" to "relaxed", and especially to "participatory". Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is considered in the latter part of this paper. The basic principles of RRA still apply with PRA but have been extended.

## RRA : ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The philosophy, approaches and methods now known as rapid rural appraisal (RRA) began to coalesce in the late 1970s. There was growing awareness both of the biases of rural development tourism - the phenomenon of the brief rural visit by the urban based professional, and of the costs, inaccuracies and delays of large-scale questionnaire surveys. More cost effective methods were sought for outsiders to learn about rural people and conditions.

In those days most professionals were reluctant to write and publish about the "informal" methods they invented and used. They feared for their professional credibility. They felt compelled to conform to standard statistical norms, however costly and crude their application. In the 1980s, though, RRA's own principles and rigour became more evident. As the 1980s began, RRA was argued to be cost-effective, especially for gaining timely information, but still with some sense that it might be a secondbest. But by the end of the 1980s, the RRA approach and methods were more and more eliciting a range and quality of information and insights inaccessible with most traditional methods. To my surprise, wherever RRA was tested against more conventional methods, it came out better. In many contexts and for many purposes, RRA, when well done, showed itself to be not a second best but a best.

In establishing the principles and methods of RRA many people and institutions took part. An incomplete listing of countries where they were developed is Australia, Bangladesh, Benin,

Colombia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Perhaps more than any other movement, agroecosystem analysis, pioneered in Southeast Asia by Gordon Conway and others at the University of Chiang Mai Khon Kaen in Thailand became world leader in developing theory and methods, especially for multidisciplinary teams and in institutionalising RRA as a part of professional training. In health and nutrition, a parallel and overlapping movement, drawing on social anthropology, was evolved in the 1980s under the rubric Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) (Scrimshaw and Hyrtado 1987) and practised in at least 20 countries. Now, as we enter the 1990s, "hard" journals regularly publish articles on RRA. The problem now is not just to gain wider acceptance for RRA and its development PRA, but also to assure and enhance quality, so that what is done is done well and better and better.

#### PRINCIPLES OF RRA

Different practitioners would list different principles, but most would agree to include the following :

- optimising trade-offs, relating the costs of learning to the useful truth of information, with trade-offs between quantity, relevance, accuracy and timeliness. This includes the principles of optimal ignorance - knowing what it is not worth knowing, and of appropriate imprecision - not measuring more precisely than needed.
- offsetting biases, especially those of rural development tourism, by being relaxed and not rushing, listening not lecturing, probing instead of passing on to the next topic, being unimposing instead of important, and seeking out the poorer people and what concerns them.
- triangulating, meaning using more than one, and often three, methods or sources of information to crosscheck.
- learning from and with rural people, directly, on the site and face-to-face, gaining from indigenous physical, technical and social knowledge.
- learning rapidly and progressively, with conscious exploration, flexible use of methods, opportunism, improvisation, iteration, and crosschecking, not following a blueprint programme but adapting in a learning process.

## THE MENU OF RRA METHODS

In its early days, RRA seemed little more than organised common sense. During the 1980s, though, much creative ingenuity was applied and more methods invented. A summary listing of headings can give some indication of the types of methods now known, without being exhaustive :

- secondary data review
- direct observation, including wandering around
- DIY (doing-it-yourself, taking part in activities)
- Key informants
- semi-structured interviews
- group interviews and discussions
- chains (sequences) of interviews
- key indicators
- workshops and brainstorming
- transects and group walks
- mapping, modelling and aerial photographs
- diagramming
- wealth ranking
- other ranking and scoring
- quantification
- ethnohistories and trend analysis
- time lines ( chronologies of events)
- stories, portraits and case studies
- team management and interactions
- key probes
- short, simple questionnaires, late in the RRA process
- rapid report writing in the field

Diagramming and ranking have provided some of the less obvious methods. Diagramming has come to include many topics, aspects and techniques, such as transects, seasonalities, spatial and social relations, institutions, trends and ecological history. Ranking methods have been evolved to elicit people's own criteria and judgements. An ingenious and simple example is wealth ranking, in the most common version of which respondents are presented with slips of paper, one for each household in a community and asked to place them in piles according to their wealth or poverty. These and other methods have been modified and developed and more will be invented in coming years.



## PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL (PRA)

RRA began as a better way for outsiders to learn. In answering the question - whose knowledge counts ? - it sought to enable outsiders to learn from rural people, and to make use of indigenous technical knowledge to assist outsiders' analysis. Its mode was mainly extractive, the knowledge of rural people counted, but for our use. But in participatory rural appraisal (PRA), knowledge is articulated and generated in more participatory ways, in which interviewing, investigation, transects, mapping, diagramming, presentation and analysis are carried out more by rural people themselves, in which they "own" more of the information and in which they identify the priorities.

PRA is, then, a new form of RRA which has more and more shifted the initiative from outsider to villager. It has developed rapidly, and this summary probably omits much that has been happening in parallel in different parts of the world. PRA has several antecedents, and draws on several traditions, including the community development of the 1950s and 1960s, the dialogics and consciencisation of Paulo Freire, participatory action research, and the work of activist NGOs in many parts of the world which have encouraged poor people to undertake their own analysis and action. The term PRA was probably first used in Kenya to describe village-level investigations, analysis and planning undertaken by the National Environment Secretariat in conjunction with Clark University, USA and PRA has been spreading in Kenya. PRA was introduced into India in a joint exercise of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and the International Institute for Environment and Development in 1988. Since then, it has evolved and spread rapidly in the NGO sector in India, with MYRADA, based in Bangalore, taking a leading role, together with AKRSP, Action Aid and others. The participatory orientation of PRA has given new impetus to the development of methods, contributing to an explosion of inventive activity in India and Nepal in the past year. One of the delights of PRA has been the lack of blueprint, and the encouragement to outsiders and villagers alike to improvise in a spirit of play.

Reviewing an astonishing year and a half of innovation by colleagues in India and Nepal, I see six points standing out as "discoveries", at least for me.

#### i. Villagers' Capabilities

Villagers have shown greater capacity to map, model, quantify and estimate, rank, score and diagram than I had supposed.

Participatory mapping and modelling have been the most striking finding. The literature on mental maps has been largely based on urban people in the North whose mental maps are quite limited. It seems that villagers in the South have much more extensive and detailed mental maps, and given the right conditions, can express this visibly on the ground or on paper, either as maps or as three-dimensional models (for example of watersheds). They have now created many (hundreds in India) of such maps and models, usually showing the huts and houses in a village (a social map) and/or the surrounding village area (a resources map). Most recently they have been indicating social details, using seeds, colour codes and markers such as bhandis (the small spots women place on their foreheads), to indicate for each household, the numbers of men, women and children, wealth/poverty, the handicapped, immunisation status, education, and much else. With an informed group or person, a census of a small village can be conducted in a fraction of an hour and much other information added by "interviewing the map".

Similarly, with quantification, estimating, ranking, scoring and diagramming, when the methods and materials are right, villagers have shown themselves capable of generating and analysing information beyond normal professional expectations. The fixation of professionals that only "we" can count and measure has tended to obscure the capacities of rural people themselves. Normal professionalism also values absolute as against relative or comparative quantification and identifies trends and changes by comparing measurements at different points of time. This is often unnecessary. For practical purposes directions of change, and rough proportions of change, are often all that are needed; and using PRA methods, these can be indicated by villagers without measuring absolute values. Various methods of ranking and more recently of scoring, have also proved powerful sources of insight.

In all this, the methods and materials have been important in enabling villagers' capabilities to be expressed but methods in themselves are not enough.

## ii. The Primacy of Rapport

The key to facilitating such participation is rapport. As first sight, it is a mystery why it has taken until 1990 to "discover" the richness of the knowledge, creativity and analytical capacity in villagers. But when the widespread beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of outsiders are considered, there is little mystery. Outsiders have been conditioned to believe and assume that villagers are ignorant and have either lectured them, holding sticks and wagging fingers, or have interviewed them, asking rapid question, interrupting, and not listening beyond immediate replies. "Our lecturing and interviewing are much of the problem. The ignorance of rural people is then an artifact of our ignorance of how to enable them express, share and extend their knowledge. The attitudes and behaviour needed for rapport have been missing. These include :

- \* participation by the outsider
- \* respect for the villager
- \* interest in what villagers have to say and show
- \* patience, wandering around, not rushing and not interrupting
- \* humility
- \* materials and methods which empower villagers to express and analyse their knowledge.

## iii. Visual sharing

Visual sharing is a common element in much PRA. With a questionnaire survey, information is transferred from the words of the person interviewed to the paper of the questionnaire schedule where it becomes a possession of the interviewer. The learning is one-off. The information becomes personal and private, owned by the interviewer and underfived. In contrast, with visual sharing of a map, model, diagram, or units (stones, seeds, small fruits etc.) used for quantification, ranking or scoring, all who are present can see, point to, discuss, manipulate and alter physical objects or representations. Triangulation and

For example, in participatory mapping and modelling, villagers draw and model their villages and resources, deciding what to include and debating, adding and modifying detail. Everyone can see what is being "said" because it is being "done". In shared diagramming, information is diagrammed to represent, for example, seasonal changes in dimensions such as rainfall, agricultural labour, income, indebtedness, food supply and migration. Paper can be used for diagrams, but the ground and other local materials have the advantage of being "theirs", media which villagers can command and alter with confidence.

#### iv. Sequence

Some of the participatory methods have been known and used in the past (Rhoades 1990). There are now some new ones but perhaps more striking is the power of combinations and sequences. To take some examples :

- \* with participatory mapping, villagers draw not one, but several maps, successively becoming more detailed and useful.
- \* social mapping provides a basis for household listings, and for indicating population, social group, health and other household characteristics and is a useful stage in most topic PRAs.
- \* transects are planned using a participatory map, leading naturally into villagers acting as guides for outsiders.
- \* wealth ranking follows easily and well from a village social map which provides an up-to-date household listing.
- \* with matrix ranking, eliciting a villager's criteria of goodness and badness of a class of things (trees, vegetables, fodder grasses, varieties of a crop or animal, sources of credit, market outlets, fuel types...) leads into discussion of preferences and actions.
- \* with a transect, observation and discussion lead into the identification of problems and opportunities and discussions of what might be done and by whom.
- \* in a group interview, key informants are identified for further discussions.

In such ways as these, participatory methods fit well with a flexible learning process approach which is more open-ended and adaptable than most earlier RRA.

#### v. Training and Reorientation for Outsiders

RRA training conducted in Thailand in 1990 took six weeks, which was considered inadequate. Much PRA training in India has been taking from three to five days. This usually entails a team camping in a village, learning and using various methods, all as part of a participatory process which leads to identifying actions by and with villagers. Staying a number of nights in the village intensifies and concentrates the experience. Attention is paid to outsiders' attitudes and behaviour. Villagers are encouraged to map, diagram, participate in transects and plan. The aim of the training for the outsiders is to facilitate changes in perception and action, listening not lecturing, learning progressively, embracing error, being critically self-aware and themselves participating, for example reversing roles by being taught by villagers to perform village tasks. For some outsiders, especially those who have had a very strict normal professional training, no significant change may take place. For some, though, there opens up a new range of possibilities and a sense of freedom to experiment and innovate. It is then not necessary to be trained in all the methods. They can be tried, improvised and adapted subsequently and new ones can be invented. The outsider's creativity is released, as well as that of the villager.

#### vi. Sharing and Spread

PRA in practice has three foundations : behaviour and attitudes; methods; and sharing. At first, the methods appeared the most important foundation; then the behaviour and attitudes of outsiders were seen as primary, especially for rapport; and now the third foundation, sharing, is rising in its relative importance. This is partly because it has become the mode in which PRA spreads. PRA in India has a culture of sharing which owes much to MYRADA but also to other NGOs. Village camps have been open to people from other organisations. Typically, a training camp organised by an NGO will include not just its own staff but also people from other NGOs and from government. Sharing is part of the experience of the camp : sharing of information by villagers, presenting it to each other and to outsiders; sharing of ideas and experience concerning approaches and

methods; sharing of self-critical appraisal of the process among colleagues; and sharing of food between outsiders and villagers who have been participating.

If PRA is spreading through the sharing of experience and mutual learning. It is also taking different forms in different places. People and organisations are inventing their own variants. Some emphasise one set of methods; some another. Any one method - transects, or wealth ranking for example - is done differently in different places. Interchanges, with staff of one organisation spending time with other organisations in their PRAs, mean that ideas are continuously picked up and developed. Creativity and inventiveness, too, on the part of villagers, come into play.

#### Dangers

RRA and PRA face dangers.

The first danger is faddism. Like farming systems research, RRA and PRA could be discredited by over-rapid adoption and misuse and by sticking on labels without substance. The warning signs are there : demand for training which exceeds by far the competent trainers available; requirements that consultants "use PRA" and then consultants who say they will do so, when they do not know what RRA or PRA entail, or have only read about them, not experienced and used them; and the belief that good RRA and PRA are simple and easy, quick fixes, when they are not.

A second danger is rushing. The word "rapid", necessary in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is now a liability, in danger of being used to legitimate biased rural development tourism, when really the R of RRA should stand for "relaxed", allowing plenty of time. One danger here is that hurry or lack of commitment will mean that the poorest are, once again, neither seen, listened to, nor learnt from, when much of the rationale for RRA/PRA is to make time to find poorest, to learn from them, and to empower them.

A third danger is formalism. With any innovation, there is an urge to standardise and codify, often in the name of quality. Farming systems research and some variants of RRA, have given rise to heavy manuals.



These then become a problem, blocking innovation and spread. The lack of a manual for PRA in India has been much of its strength, for would be practitioners have been forced to learn, not from books and not by rote but from colleagues, through sharing and from their own experiences. Many of the best innovations have come from practitioners not following established methods. Manuals can be useful sources of ideas, especially for trainers. But they should not be allowed to inhibit, or to transfer responsibility from an individual practitioner to an external authority. Practitioners must feel free to start, to make mistakes, and to learn on the run. It is not books of instructions, but personal commitment, critical awareness and informed improvisation, which assure quality and creativity.

### Potentials

Despite these dangers, the long-term potentials of both normal RRA and of its newer form in PRA, seem vast. Except perhaps for Thailand, RRA has been adopted only on a small, localised, scale. We are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. But already an RRA approach and methods have been used for appraisal and analysis in many subject areas. These include agroecosystems; natural resources, forestry and the environment; irrigation; technology and innovation; health and nutrition; farming systems research and extension; pastoralism; marketing; disaster relief; organisations; social, cultural and economic conditions; and many special topics. Many other applications can be expected, urban as well as rural, and in the North as well as the South.

Much of the future would seem to lie with PRA. It has several strong points. By transferring the initiative to rural people, it generates rapport, and forces outsiders to learn. It elicits, presents and crosschecks much information in little time. And it is usually full of surprises, different each time, and interesting and enjoyable for all concerned. Moreover, through encouraging rural people to present and analyse what they know, it can generate commitment to sustainable action, as it has done in both Kenya and India. Increasingly in India, NGOs are adopting the PRA approach and methods as part of the process of identifying development actions by and with villagers, in domains which include watershed management, social forestry, credit, horticulture, and marketing cooperative development. The PRA approach and methods appear versatile and adaptable, and other applications can be expected. PRA also enhances capabilities. It can entail not just shared knowledge, but also shared analysis, creativity and commitment.

In addition, for the 1990s, three potentials stand out.

First, RRA/PRA has to date still made rather little impression in universities and training institutes. Universities in Thailand are exceptions, making it important to learn why. In India, in the early 1990s, it is key training institutions rather than universities which are starting to adopt and develop PRA, especially for the village fieldwork to their students, liberating them from the slavery of the survey questionnaire. These include the National Academy of Administration at Mussoorie, the National Forest Academy at Dehra Dun, the Institute of Rural Management at Anand, the Indian Institute of Forest Management at Bhopal, and the Xavier Institute of Social Service at Ranchi. Only when many more universities and other territory institutions for education and training employ RRA and PRA, and when a new generation of professionals is well versed in their philosophy and methods, will they finally and securely take root. The potential for applications in training and education remains enormous and still largely unrecognised.

Second, all too often senior officials and academics who pronounce and prescribe on rural development lack recent direct knowledge, and base their analysis and action on ignorance or on personal experience which is decades out of date. RRA/PRA can bring them face-to-face with rural people. Mini-sabbaticals in villages for senior officials are being discussed and experience to date in India has been that they appreciate PRA and take to it well, if suitably introduced. PRA experiences can help them to keep in contact and up-to-date and to correct error. It can provide learning which is intellectually exciting, practically relevant, and often fun.



Third PRA supports decentralisation and diversity, allowing and enabling local people to take command of their resources and to determine what fits their needs. By involving them from the very beginning of a development action, it should enable them to own it more and should contribute to commitment and sustainability. It is part of the paradigm for rural development which stresses process, participation, local knowledge and reversals of learning. Nothing in rural development is ever a panacea, and PRA faces problems of spread, scale and quality assurance. But for the 1990s and beyond, it does present promise. To make the 1990s a decade of local empowerment and diversity, participatory rural appraisal could have a key part play.

22 April 1991

Robert Chambers  
Administrative staff College of India  
Bellavista  
Hyderabad - 500 049  
India

Note .:

This is an updated and expanded revision of a paper originally published in *Appropriate Technology*, Vol.16 number 4, March 1990 pp 14 - 16 and then revised for a seminar at the University of Chiang Mai, Thailand on 23 November 1990.

### Appendix : Sources and Contacts

\* = to the best of my knowledge available free on request from the Sustainable Agriculture Programme, International Institute for Environment and Development, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD.

Much of the now large literature on rapid and participatory rural appraisal is grey and ephemeral, but the sources recommended below include some of the more accessible.

#### For RRA :

Early publications on RRA available in some libraries include Agriculture Administration Vol.8 No.6, 1981; and Richard Longhurst ed. Rapid Rural Appraisal : Social Structure and Rural Economy, IDS Bulletin vol.12 no.4, 1981.

The best wide-ranging introductions to RRA are :

Khon Kaen University, 1987 Proceedings of the 1985 International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal, Rural Systems Research and Farming Systems Research Projects, Khon Kaen, Thailand, University of Khon Kaen, Thailand.

\* Jennifer McCracken, Jules Pretty and Gordon Conway 1988 An Introduction to Rapid Rural Appraisal for Agricultural Development, IIED.

Both these publications have bibliographies.

#### For RAP :

Susan Scrimshaw and Elena Hurtado, 1987 Rapid Assessment Procedures for Nutrition and Primary Health Care : anthropological approaches to improving programme effectiveness, UNU Tokyo, UNICEF, and University of California Latin American Center, University of California, Los Angeles. Write to UCLA.

## For PRA

Robert Rhoades 1990 "The Coming Revolution in Methods for Rural Development Research', User's Perspective Network (UPWARD), International Potato Center (CIP), P.O.Box 933, Manila, Philippines is thoughtful and provocative paper, which indicates some origins of the PRA approach and methods. Write to UPWARD.

- \* Charity Kabutha and Richard Ford "Using RRA to Formulate a Village Resources Management Plan, Mbusanyi, Kenya". in RRA Notes 2, October 1988 pp.4-11.
- \* Jennifer McCracken, Participatory Rural Appraisal in Gujarat; a trial model for the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India), IIED, London 1988.
- \* An Introduction to Participatory Rural Appraisal for Rural Resources Management, Programme for International Development, Clerk University, Worcester, Mass, USA and National Environment Secretariat, Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, Nairobi, Kenya, November 1989.
- \* PRA Handbook, from the same programme in Kenya, a larger and longer version, available from IIED.
- \* A series of R/PRA handbook are being prepared by IIED and should be available free later in 1991. These promise to be an invaluable source of ideas and shared experience.

## To Keep Up with Developments :

As we enter the 1990s, developments in rapid and participatory rural appraisal have themselves become rapid. The two best sources for keeping up are :

1. \* RRA Notes, IIED
2. The PALM/PRA Series free on request from MYRADA, 2 Service Road, Domlur Layout, Bangalore 560 071, India. PALM = participatory learning methods. The series already includes issues on participatory mapping, interviewing, enhancing participation in PRA, and other practical experience and advice. I recommend this series especially for those interested in recent practical aspect of PRA.

To gain direct experience :

Action Aid, P.B. 5406, 3 Resthouse Road (next to Lumbini Apartments), Bangalore 560 001, India is a clearing house for information about PRA in India. This includes forthcoming village camps. I warmly recommend any reader, whether from India or abroad, who wants to find out more through a direct PRA experience, to make contact with Action Aid, and to try to get a place to take part in a camp. Let me finally hope that those organisations which are competent and willing to organise such camps and to welcome others to them, will continue to be generous and sharing, so that more and more people can make their own informed judgements and decisions about PRA, and adopt and adapt it if they wish.

**RELAXED AND PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL :**

**PRACTICAL APPROACHES AND METHODS**

**(Updated April 21, 1991)**

**Robert Chambers**

## RELAXED AND PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL :

### NOTES ON PRACTICAL APPROACHES AND METHODS

These notes are an outline introduction to what has been called rapid (but is better relaxed) and participatory rural appraisal. The headings indicate some of the range of the subject, and especially some of the many methods now known. Please do not be put off by the length of the lists. They are a menu, not a syllabus!

Pointers are given to the history, rationale and methods of rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and of its further development now often known as participatory rural appraisal (PRA). The earlier PRA was more "extractive": "We" went to rural areas and obtained data from "them", brought it away, and processed it, sometimes to see what we thought would be good for "them". Recently, this has become more participatory: "We" still go to rural areas, but more and more it is rural people who teach us, and they who present and share the data, do the analysis, and own the outcome.

Some of the methods, especially diagramming, were first developed and practised on any scale in Southeast Asia, as part of agroecosystem analysis, by Gordon Conway and others, and the University of Khon Kaen in Thailand has been a major source of innovation and inspiration. But RRA/PRA knows no boundaries. Interestingly, RRA/PRA technology is now being transferred from South to North, with these methods being used in Switzerland and Australia in agriculture and in the UK in health.

The term PRA was probably first used in 1988 in Kenya, where its application is spreading. In the past year and a half, south asia (India and Nepal) has achieved an explosion of PRA innovation which shows no signs of slowing down, accompanied by rapid spread in both NGOs and now increasingly in Government. I am amazed at how much I have had to revise these notes as a result of the experience of recent months. It is difficult to keep up with the innovations of NGOs such as MYRADA in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in Gujarat, Action Aid in Karnataka and elsewhere, SPEECH near Madurai, KGVK in Ranchi, and others, of various agencies in Nepal, and of the

villagers with whom all these have been working. People (villagers and outsiders), once they have unfrozen and established rapport, enjoy improvising, varying and inventing methods.

A current question is what potential the approaches and methods have for training institutes and for Government field organisations. Many requests have now been received for training of government staff, and this has been undertaken in Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, UP, West Bengal and other States. So far most of this has been concerned with village-level planning, watershed development and management, social forestry, tank rehabilitation, women's programmes, credit client ("beneficiary") selection and deselection, health, animal husbandry and agricultural extension. Training institutes are interested in adopting and adapting the approach and methods for the fieldwork and field experience of their probationers and students. Those exploring such applications include LBS National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie, the IG National Forest Academy, Dehra Dun, the Institute of Rural Management, Anand, the Indian Institute of Forest Management, Bhopal, Mysore, and the Xavier Institute of Social Service, Ranchi.

In contrast, universities have been slow to show interest. The NGOs and NGO staff with experience are increasing quite fast, and competent trainers have doubled or trebled in the past six months. A recent estimate is that 50 people in India are now conducting training.

Quality assurance has now to become a special concern. There are dangers of demand for training exceeding supply, and of trying to go too far too fast. There is a danger of PRA becoming a fashionable label, of people saying they are doing it when they are not, and thereby discrediting it, and of people doing it without rapport and then saying that the methods do not work. At the same time, some people whose attitudes are truly participatory can, with a minimum of exposure, simply go ahead and learn as they go. The key is personal behaviour and attitude. This includes critical self awareness and embracing error; sitting down, listening and learning; not lecturing but "handing over the stick" to villagers, who become the main teachers and analysts; having confidence that "they can do it"; and an open-ended inventiveness.



In the meantime, the methods are spreading on their own. To give just one example, Samakhya, a voluntary agency based in Hyderabad, has adopted and adapted participatory mapping and the principle of "handing over the stick" as part of the process of forming new cooperatives. More and more people are trying out the methods and inventing their own and their own variations. Part of the reason seems to be that when done well, with good rapport, these methods work, involving villagers in their own analysis and planning, and giving outsiders good insights. The experience is also often enjoyable for all concerned. Some observers are talking of a coming revolution in rural research methods. I do not think too much should be claimed too soon. We can wait and see how things develop and each of us can make a personal judgement.

Whatever that judgement is, you may agree that professional change is in the wind. Some of the more obvious changes are offsetting the biases of rural development tourism and liberation from survey slavery (meaning heavy and long questionnaire surveys). Less obvious, and more of a frontier, is involving rural people themselves much more as investigators, analysts and consultants, with them taking more part in setting priorities, planning, and implementing, and owning the process.

Much PRA is enjoyed, both by rural participants and by outsiders who initiate it. The word "fun" is entering the vocabulary and describes some of the experience. "Relaxed" rural appraisal is a better description than "rapid". And the word "appraisal" is a bit out of date now. Participatory learning is closer. "We" learn from "them". They also learn something by presenting information and teaching us. Much of our knowledge is still useful, but unless we start by unlearning and firmly putting our knowledge, ideas and categories in second place, we cannot effectively learn from and with them.

Some people with a strong disciplinary training find this reversal of teaching and learning difficult. It is not their fault. We can help another firmly but sympathetically. And we can amiably tease one another when we slip into "holding the stick" (which guess who will be doing during much of this day).

That is enough prose. Now for some headings and notes.



# Why Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) Originally in the late 1970s and 1980s?

Need: accelerating rural change, and the need for good and timely information and insights.

Recognising "us" and our confidence in our knowledge as much of the problem, and "them" and their knowledge as much of the solution.

Rural development tourism - anti-poverty biases (spatial, project, person, seasonal, l...), and being rapid and wrong.

The insulation, isolation and out-of-date experience of senior and powerful people, most of them men

Survey slavery - questionnaire surveys which take long, mislead, are wasteful, and are reported on, if at all, late

The search for cost-effectiveness, recognising trade-offs between depth, breadth, accuracy, and timeliness, assessing actual beneficial use of information against costs of obtaining it.

## SOME CORE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF RRA

- \* rapid progressive learning - flexible, exploratory, interactive, inventive
- \* reversals - learning from, with and by rural people, eliciting and using their criteria and categories, and finding, understanding and appreciating ITK (indigenous technical knowledge)
- \* optimal ignorance, and appropriate imprecision - not finding out more than is needed, not measuring more accurately than needed, and not trying to measure what does not need to be measured. We are trained to make absolute measurements, but often trends, scores or ranking are all that are required.

- \* triangulation - using different methods, sources and disciplines and a range of informants in a range of places, and crosschecking to get closer to the truth through successive approximations.
- \* principal investigators direct contact, face to face, in the field.

#### THE CORE OF PRA

PRA, as it is evolving, is all this and more. Some of the 'more' is :

- \* empowering and enabling villagers to do more or all of the investigation, mapping, modelling, diagramming, ranking, scoring, quantification, analysis, planning... themselves, and to share and own the outcome
- \* for this, the primacy of rapport, and our behaviour and attitudes - asking villagers to teach us, respect for them, confidence that they can do it, handing over the stick...
- \* a culture of sharing - of information, of methods, of food, of field experiences (between NGOs, Government and villagers)
- \* critical self-awareness about attitudes and behaviour; doubt; embracing and learning from error; continuously trying to do better; building learning and improvement into every experience.

#### SOME PROBLEMS AND DANGERS

- \* how to find the poorer, and learn from and with them

- \* LECTURING INSTEAD OF LISTENING AND LEARNING Is this problem worse with men than women, worse with older men than younger, and worst of all with those who have retired? Who holds the stick? Who wags the finger? Who teaches? Who listens? Who learns?

(The ERR, which I will explain, is relevant here)

- \* senior people (and also younger ones who do not want to spend time in the field let alone camp or nighthall in a village.
- \* rushing (rapid and wrong again)
- \* imposing "our" ideas, categories, values, without realising we are doing it, making it difficult to learn from "them", and making "them" appear ignorant when they are not
- \* normal professional pressures, including the tyranny of (bad, not good) statisticians, the desire for formal statistical respectability, and the compulsion to measure things rather than just compare, rank, score, identify trends ...
- \* wanting to be snug and safe in the warm womb of a preset programme and method
- \* finding the questions to ask! (We assume we know what to ask. The beginning of wisdom is to realise how often we do not know, and to recognise that we need "their" help)
- \* male teams and neglect of women (again and again and again and again and again and....) What is the proportion of men and women in this room?
- \* LECTURING INSTEAD OF LISTENING AND LEARNING. Yes, it has to be repeated. This can be a personal problem which we do not recognise in ourselves. (It is a problem for me, as you will discover). It is best treated as a joke, and pointed out to each other when we err. Which we all do.

## APPROACHES AND METHODS

"Approach" is basic. If our attitudes are wrong, many of these methods will not work or not work as well as they should. Where attitudes are right and rapport is good, we can be suprised by what villagers show they know, and what they can do.

Dont be put off by the length of this list. Probably no one person in the world has used all these methods. The purpose of listing them is to show that the men is varied. There is much to try out and explore, and much to invent for yourself.

You will already have used some of these methods. Some are plain commonsense and common practice. Others are ingenious and not obvious. Some are quite simple to do. Others are less so. you can anyway invent your own variants. Appropriate attitudes and behaviour are often the key. Here are some of the approaches and methods ;

- \* offset the anti-poverty biases of rural development tourism (spetial, project; person, seasonal, courtesy...)
- \* find and review secondary data. They can mislead. They can also help a lot. At present, for the sake of a new balance, and of "our" reorientation and "their" participation, secondary data are not heavily stressed; but they can be very useful.
- \* observe directly (see for yourself) (It has been striking for me to begin to realise how much I do notsee,I or do not think to ask about. I will show you examples on slides. Does university education deskill us? Am I alone, or do many us have this problem.
- \* do-it-yourself, supervised and taught by them (levelling a field, puddling, transplanting, weeding, lopping tree fodder, collecting MFPs, cutting and carrying fodder grass, milking buffaloes, fetching water, fetching firewood, digging compost, sweeping and cleaning, washing clothes, lifting water, plastering a house, thatching....) Roles are reversed. They are the experts. We are the novices. We learn from them.

- \* find key informants. Ask: who are the experts/ So obvious, and so often overlooked.
- \* semi-structured interviewing. The Khon Kaen school regards this as the "core" of good RRA. Have a mental or written checklist, but be open to new aspects and to following up on the new and unexpected.
- \* groups (casual/encounter; focus/specialist; deliberately structure; community/neighbourhood). Group interviews are often powerful and efficient, but we have neglected them perhaps because of our obsession with counting through individual questionnaire-based interviews
- \* sequences or chains of interviews - from group to key informant, to other informants; or with a series of key informants, each expert on a different stage of a process (e.g. men on ploughing, women on transplanting and weeding .. etc)
- \* villagers and village residents as investigators and researchers - women, school teachers, volunteers, students, farmers, village specialists, poor people. They do transects, observe, interview other villagers. This is now a major frontier, with villagers often showing greater abilities than outsiders commonly expect.
- \* participatory mapping and modelling - aerial photographs and overlays; people's mapping, drawing and colouring on the ground or on paper to make social, health or demographic maps (of the residential village), resource maps of village lands or of forests, maps of fields, farms, home gardens, or topic maps (for water, soils, trees etc etc); making 3-D models of watersheds etc. These methods have been one of the most popular "discoveries" of the past year, and can be combined with or lead into wealth or wellbeing ranking, watershed planning, health action planning etc.
- \* participatory transects - systematically walking with key informants through an area, observing, asking,

listening, discussing, identifying different zones, local technologies, introduced technologies, seeking problems, solutions, opportunities and mapping and/or diagramming resources and findings. Transects now take many forms- vertical, loop, nalla, combing...

- \* time line; a history of major remembered events in a village with approximate dates. A good icebreaker, and a good lead into
- \* local histories: people's accounts of the past, of how things close to them have changed, ecological histories, histories of cropping patterns, changes in customs and practices, changes and trends in population, migration, fuels used, education, health..... and causes of these
- \* seasonal diagramming - days of rain, amount of rain or soil moisture, crops, agricultural labour, non-agricultural labour, diet, food consumption, sickness, prices, animal fodder, fuel, migration, income, expenditure debt etc.
- \* livelihood analysis - seasonality, crises and coping, relative income, expenditure, credit and debt, multiple activities ...
- \* participatory diagramming, estimating and analysis - bar diagrams, visible estimating using seeds, pellets, fruits, stones etc, pie diagrams, chapati diagrams etc, causal diagramming and analysis....
- \* wealth or wellbeing ranking - identifying clusters of households according to wealth or wellbeing, including those considered poorest or worst off. a good lead into discussions of the livelihoods of the poor and how they cope
- \* ranking and scoring - especially pairwise ranking, and direct matrix ranking and scoring. Innovations in the past few months confirm that these are versatile methods for eliciting and learning villagers' categories, criteria, priorities and choices.
- \* key local indicators, e.g. what are poor people's criteria of wellbeing, and how do they differ from those we assume for them?

- \* key probes; questions which can lead direct to key issues such as - "What do you talk about when you are together?" "What new practices have you or others in this village experimented with in recent years?" "What happens when someone's hut burns down?" "What (vegetable, tree, crop, crop variety, type of animal, tool, equipment...) would you like to obtain to try out?".....
- \* case studies and stories - a household history and profile, a farm, coping with a crisis, how a conflict was or was not resolved....
- \* rural people's own analysis, priorities, futures desired, choices etc. A frontier on which many outsiders have experience, but where much remains to be learnt and shared about approaches and methods
- \* team interactions - changing pairs, evening discussions, mutual help, etc where the team may be just outsiders, or a joint team with villagers
- \* shared presentations and analysis, where maps, models, diagrams, and findings are presented by villagers and outsiders. Brainstorming, especially joint sessions with villagers. But who talks? Who talks how much? Who interrupts whom? Whose ideas dominate/ Who lectures?
- \* contrast comparisons - asking group A why group B is different or does something different, and vice versa
- \* questionnaires. If at all, let them be late, light and tight, tied to dummy tables. NOT long questionnaires, and NOT early in the process, unless for a sharp and narrow purpose
- \* rapport writing then and there. Easier said than done. But remember the files and queues of supplicants waiting when you get back. Will the report sit in the I-will-do-it-next-week-when-there-will-be-more-time box, and silt over with layers of later papers? And even if you do get round to it, how much will you have forgotten after the lapse of time/



## PRACTICAL TIPS

- \* Don't lecture. Look, listen and learn. Facilitate. Don't dominate. Don't interrupt. When they are mapping, modelling or diagramming, don't interfere; let them get on with it. When people are thinking or discussing before replying, give them time to think or discuss.

So Listen, Learn, Facilitate. Don't Dominate! Don't Interrupt!

- \* embrace error. We all make mistakes, and do things badly sometimes. Never mind. Don't hide it. Share it. When things go wrong, treat it as an opportunity to learn. Say 'Ahha. That was a mess. Good. Now what can we learn from it?'

- \* ask yourself - who is being met and heard, and what is being seen, where and why; and who is not being met and heard, and what is not being seen, and where and why/

- \* relax (RRA = relaxed rural appraisal). Don't rush.

- \* meet people when it suits them, and when they can be at ease, not when it suits us. (Well, compromises are often necessary, but it is a good discipline, and good for rapport, to try to meet at their best times rather than ours); and don't force discussions to go on for too long. Stop before people are tired.

- \* be around in the evening, at night and in the early morning. Stay the night in villages if you can

- \* allow unplanned time, walk and wander around

- \* ask about what is seen

- \* probe (sounds easy, but is one of the most neglected skills, oftendriver out by actual or supposed lack of time. All too often we accept the first reply to a question as being all that is needed, when there is much, muchmore to be learnt, and people know more, much more,, than we supposed)



- \* notice, seize on, investigate, the unexpected.
- \* use the six helpers - who, what, where, when, why and how
- \* ask open-ended questions
- \* show interest and enthusiasm in learning from people
- \* have second and third meetings and interviews with the same people
- \* allow more time than expected for team interaction ( I have never yet got this right) and for changing the agenda
- \* enjoy it! It is often very interesting, and often fun

#### EXAMPLES AND APPLICATIONS

These are almost endless. You will have your own needs and ideas. But some are :

- \* exploratory learning about rural conditions generally
- \* starting in a village. Participatory project and programme identification and planning by and with villagers.
- \* selection of clients ("beneficiaries") for poverty-oriented programmes
- \* direct field learning and updating for senior professionals and officials, especially those trapped in headquarters
- \* natural resource assessment, agroecosystem analysis, appraisal for watershed development, etc

- \* health and nutrition investigations and assessments
- \* assessing and dealing with emergencies
- \* enabling a group (e.g. landless labourers, poor women, farmers etc) itself to analyse conditions, and to specify their priorities
- \* topic and problem RRAs; investigating a topic or understanding the reasons for a problem - why poor farmers do and don't take loans; why they do and don't plant trees; how poor people spend lump sums of money; traditional and new treatments for sickness, and sequences and preferences in using them; local practices of soil, water and nutrient conservation and concentration; how people spend their time; historical changes in child-rearing practices; the non-adoption of an innovation; why some children do not go to school, or drop out; historical changes in diet; seasonal deprivation; migration; impact of a road; the reality of what happens in a Government programme
- \* project and programme management - monitoring, evaluation, reappraisal, ad hoc problem investigation...
- \* identifying research priorities and initiating participatory research
- \* academic research
- \* preliminary investigations for questionnaire surveys
- \* orientaton of students, NGO workers, Government staff, and university and training institute staff towards a culture of open learning in organisations
- \* encouraging and enabling the expression and exploitation of local diversity in otherwise standardised programmes
- \* gaining timely information for government decision-making and you will have others to add.

## SOME FRONTIERS OF PRA

Here are some current questions:

- \* How to prevent RRA/PRA (or whatever anything like them is called) becoming an overblown donors' and department's darling, a fad seen as a panacea, a fashion on that flourishes too fast and then fades and falls on its face
- \* How, rapidly and effectively, to enable outsiders to change their behaviour and attitudes
- \* How to sustain and enhance sharing, between outsiders and villagers, between NGOs, between NGOs, and government...
- \* How to enable women, and the poorer, to take part more and more, and to gain more and more
- \* How to identify, handle and resolve conflicts between groups in villages
- \* How to avoid arousing undue expectations and dependence among villagers
- \* How to sustain and enhance inventiveness and creativity with new methods, and with combinations and sequences of methods
- \* How to assure quality when approaches and methods spread on their own
- \* How to find and support more people able and willing to facilitate experience and training of others
- \* How to test, validate and legitimate PRA in the face to conservative professionalism

- \* How to liberate those trapped in universities and conservative training institutions, overcoming or bypassing institutional inertia, escaping from the classroom prison, and reassuring senior professionals who feel threatened
- \* How to liberate researchers, and nurture play, inventiveness creativity and learning

And you will have your own list.

#### THE FUTURE OF PRA

Is the biggest need and opportunity the use of PRA in Government field organisations? For new roles and new relationships between officials and people: for planning and action by villagers; for decentralisation, differentiation, and reversals for diversity?

If so, who will be the best facilitators and trainers? People in NGOs? People in Government training institutes? Or Government field staff themselves? Or who?

Are PRA type approaches and methods as they evolve mere fringe phenomena and passing fads, or are they the vanguards of a paradigm shift, a permanent change, something that will come to stay, grow and spread, in NGOs, Government organisations, training institutes, and even universities?

Do they present points of entry for change? Part of an agenda for the 1990s and the 21st century?

I hope that this day will enable you to make your own judgement about questions such as these, and to decide for yourself whether PRA approaches and methods can be of use to you in your work.

Robert Chambers

21 April 1991

Administrative Staff College of India  
Bellavista  
Hyderabad 500 049