
Appraising Appraisal—Towards Improved Dialogue in Rural Planning

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Introduction

The acceptance of development planning decisions requires appropriate reasons. One strategy for determining reasons is to make use of the rules practised in science. Surveys based on the procedures of positivist social science are widely employed to this end. Nevertheless, the use of scientific procedures in the planning field is not without its costs. Certain contradictions become apparent. In its positivist formulation science is open-ended. Discoveries cannot be specified at the outset, nor is a time limit imposed: the moment of discovery is not predictable. Planning decisions, on the other hand, are constrained by time. A further difficulty lies in the fact that 'openness', in terms of access to information, is an important rule in positivist projects. Planning documents and surveys are not always generally accessible in this way. It is possible, for example, for academically accredited researchers to be told that it is 'not [agency] policy to prejudice the integrity of its operations in [X] by making evaluation reports available to members of the general public'. There is a conflict of procedural rules, therefore. Using science to underwrite the acceptability of reasons supporting planning decisions brings pressure for public accountability and the risk that research constrained by tight deadlines will be dismissed as superficial.

Some might be attracted to the idea of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), therefore, as a conceptual sleight of hand for overcoming problems relating to the legitimacy of socio-economic survey procedures when these are used in the development planning field. Failure to maintain commitment to open-ended research is less damaging if it appears that there are formal (or formalist) procedures for estimating the error terms associated with work done to tight deadlines.

But there is another way of looking at RRA which, far from bolstering the legitimacy of positivist social science methods in planning, issues a challenge to positivism, and brings under scrutiny the nature of the connection between planning decisions and results generated by socioeconomic survey. Such scrutiny suggests the possibility that surveys do not necessarily generate decisions. Politics determines a range of possible decisions, and 'client-oriented' research is often the search for reasons 'validating' or confirming the selection of a decision preferred on political grounds. There is nothing improper in this, except where survey procedures are used to disguise the political nature of

planning decisions by making them appear scientifically or technically 'inevitable'. The point is that planning is a mixed field, combining politics, science and technology, and that in many cases RRA is justifiable on firmer grounds than that it is simply a cost-effective, if less than ideal, alternative to 'proper' social survey. In the context of the politics of planning decisions it may—on occasion—prove to be a better, more appropriate, approach. This arises from the circumstance that RRA cannot claim such a high degree of methodological privilege as 'normal' social survey, so a) it is less easy to disguise a political issue as technical, b) the case is strengthened for taking more notice of 'informal' research carried out by grass-roots organisations (material of this kind is otherwise often dismissed on the grounds that it is 'unscientific' evidence, but by the same token results generated by RRA would have to be discounted), c) resources otherwise tied up in costly formal surveys are released for a range of 'alternative' research strategies.

This is not to argue against thorough long-term social science investigation of development problems, but to suggest that such research may prove inappropriate, and even misleading, when coupled to the immediate needs of planning if it acts in such a way as to suppress awareness of the political issues at stake in planning choices. The strength of RRA lies in the compulsion to be honest about its essential subjectivity.

The manifest limitations of RRA help usefully to alienate the researcher from the field methods used. To be chafed constantly by rhetoric relating to 'quick and dirty' methods, 'rural tourism' and 'cost-effectiveness' research criteria is to be reminded that the methods in use lead to 'committed' representations of reality, that many such representations are possible, and that their differences require political as well as intellectual resolution.

In particular, the overt methodological weaknesses of RRA (from the conventional point of view) force 'professional' researchers to consider two additional aspects of their work when operating in planning fields, namely:

- a) the need to negotiate their research findings with a range of interest groups and organisations in the areas in which they carry out research;
- b) the possibility of such groups carrying out their own research and formulating their own conclusions, to be incorporated alongside more orthodox survey results

when planning options are considered at the political level.

The remainder of this paper discusses suggestions relating to the development of these two points.

RRA as a Means of Stimulating Dialogue in Planning

Groups and individuals supplying information to researchers are not unaware of the significance of surveys and the ways in which their answers will be used. In Nigeria in the 1930s, villagers, even in remote areas, rapidly grasped the political purpose of ethnographic 'intelligence reports' compiled by colonial district administrators in the aftermath of disturbances in eastern Nigeria. It is clear—sometimes from the contradictory nature of the evidence compiled—that locally opposed groups organised to try and ensure the incorporation of alternative versions of history and social structure. These documents—the appended field interview itineraries revealing them to be genuine examples of RRA—continued to have considerable importance in land disputes and local politics in general. Some would argue, therefore, that they were important not for the information they contained but as media for re-establishing a political dialogue (albeit imperfectly) between local communities and central government: a dialogue with considerable implications for the independence struggle, and which also helped shape the development planning initiatives of the time. It is unlikely that rapid 'ethnographic' research of this kind could ever have been contemplated other than in a highly politicised context, or ever intended to serve other than political purposes. It is not entirely clear that the much more intensely researched scientific ethnographies of the period remained altogether free from such influences either.

The advantage to the colonial administration of adopting a 'research' idiom appears to have been that it allowed them room for manoeuvre in politically delicate—and largely uncharted—territories. It was a means of measuring the strength of political organisation and feeling, and mapping out bargaining positions, without prior commitment to specific policies. An otherwise preferred line is readily backtracked if research indicates its inexpediency.

RRA in present-day development contexts is much less obviously political. The emphasis is now on the technical. Local interest groups are unlikely, however, to neglect the political potential of such appraisal initiatives. Field experience suggests that they penetrate 'technicist' disguises—ie spot the politics in technology—more readily than development experts raised in 'technological' cultures. This is an opportunity rather than a problem, however, since it is clear that many development projects are in difficulties not

because the technology fails but because they are 'under-politicised' at the local level—that is, no one thought to negotiate the kinds of projects preferred by the peoples and groups concerned. When are issues relating to 'integrated agricultural development', for example, put to the vote? (Similar problems over democratic rights and representation have arisen in Britain, for example, over issues such as motorway and airport developments.) New technologies often appear to require new types of political negotiations. Suitably politically sophisticated RRA is, if properly structured a useful and valid means of laying the foundations for the necessary dialogue.

The weakness of the Nigerian colonial ethnographic survey stemmed, in the end, not from the politicisation of the research procedures but from failure to continue to negotiate the results. The colonial regime was looking for a once-and-for-all structure for local administration—one which Governor Cameron believed would be 'stable' because it was grounded in principles of social organisation 'natural' to the groups concerned. This was to misrepresent (or misread) the dynamic of Nigerian rural society in the early twentieth century, and the resulting administrative reforms proved far from durable. A much more deliberately 'interactive' approach is needed if RRA is to perform a similar research function in modern planning contexts.

Research and Feedback

At least as much effort as goes into rapid social survey procedures will have to be spent on feeding back results to interest groups concerned. RRA will need first to set itself the task of indentifying and listing such groups. Formal organisations—eg political party branches, producers and traders associations, town and village self-help groups, etc—are generally easily identified and contacted. Other, possibly less readily 'visible' groups, will need to be brought into the picture as well. This is where even very brief spells of participant observation can be useful (even though there are dangers in an over-naive use of this technique). Richards (1979) notes that accepting local hospitality first raised the issue that not all groups were equally keen to see a control programme introduced for the Variegated Grasshopper—poor people in some areas treated the insect as a delicacy. Karimu and Richards (1980) and Richards (1981) found short-term membership of work parties important for understanding how such groups are formed, and why different types of work parties differed in their preferences for upland and swamp rice cultivation. Work party organisers were thus identified as an important group with definite views on agricultural development priorities. At the same time, the researchers' participation in the work, in at least one instance, strengthened a work party convenor's case for extracting labour on favourable terms from clients who had until then proved resistant

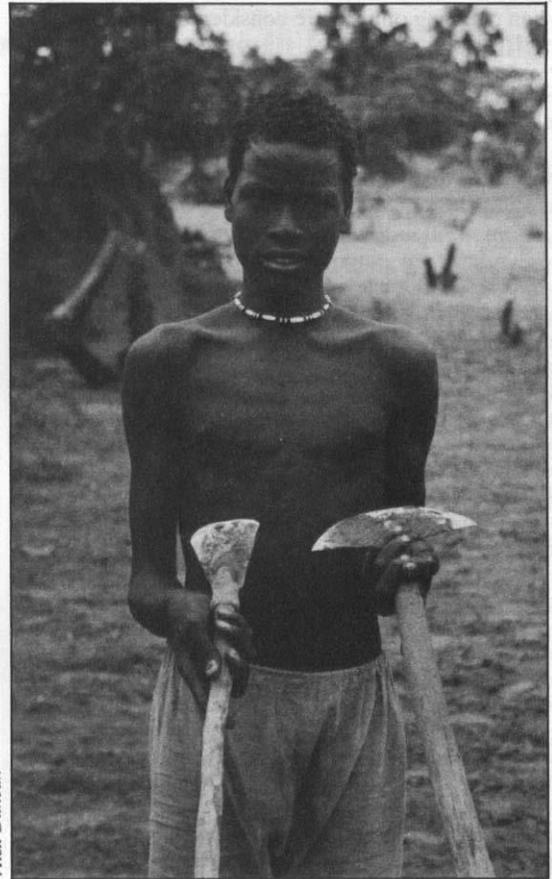
to his claims on their time. This adds to the point that research is, perhaps inevitably, seen in 'political' terms by the people among whom it is carried out, thus supporting the case for abandoning any pretence at objectivity and reverting to a whole-hearted acceptance of survey procedures as devices for furthering planning dialogue. Nevertheless, it is also a reminder to RRA researchers that 'quick and dirty' does not mean 'simple-minded'.

When an appropriate list of organisations and interest groups is assembled—and this should include research informants and interviewees—RRA draft reports (in relevant languages, and where necessary, recorded on cassette tape) should be made available to them for discussion and comment. It is part of the research methodology to organise such discussions, and to produce a 'second generation' appraisal document based on the original research findings together with the results of these discussions. It should be emphasised that it is, at this stage, the research itself which is under negotiation, not planning proposals which might subsequently be based upon it. The idea, in a sense, is to invite interested parties to cast a sceptical eye over the research findings and methodology, and to challenge them into providing additional glosses, or perhaps even to undertake their own 'alternative' research. Part of the RRA researcher's job is to encourage this kind of response, especially in the case of vulnerable groups not otherwise organised for effective responses of this kind. It is possible that the poorest and most underprivileged would find this a useful initial exercise in attempts to create appropriate representative organisations.

RRA—a Route to 'People's Science'?

It would be wrong to underestimate the possibilities of using RRA as a stimulus towards a genuine 'people's science' in the context of rural development¹. There is no lack of 'indigenous research' at present. Johnny and Richards (1980), for example, have been monitoring a sequence of experiments regularly carried out by Sierra Leonean peasant farmers to evaluate new rice varieties. They argue that the idea of a controlled input-output trial is both widespread and long-established in rural Sierra Leone, and that expensive, supervised, on-farm trials for demonstration purposes are unnecessary. Farmers are aware of the similarity between their own test procedures and university-type agronomic trials, in some cases helpfully making this connection in order better to explain the meaning of their term for experiment. The problem is not how to teach supposedly 'ignorant' villagers the elements

¹Further aspects of the issues briefly raised in this final section are dealt with in more detail in Sharpe & Richards (1980), a paper commissioned for a conference organised by the International Rice Research Institute on the potential contribution of social anthropologists to food crop research. The paper was subsequently rejected as not relevant to the main issues addressed by that conference, but it is hoped that a revised version will be published elsewhere.



Alex Duncan

'People's Science . . .' a new design of weeding hoe (right) developed by farmers in Northern Sudan is replacing a traditional type (left) used by the Dinka of Bahr-el-Ghazal province in the South.

of scientific method, but to ensure greater recognition that the issue at stake is 'whose knowledge counts'.

A politicised version of RRA has great potential in this respect if it is able to establish the sociology of knowledge as a central issue in the development field. To what extent, for example, does scientific research in agriculture create new knowledge, or simply appropriate knowledge from the oral domain of peasant culture and formalise it through the system of scientific publication? And if the latter occurs—even if only on a relatively minor scale—what does this tell us about the power relations which underpin orthodox science?

The weight of evidence for the notion that much ethnoscience is 'good' science is now sufficiently great to suggest the need for a considerable reorientation of the way in which scientific research for Third World rural development is organised. Fewer resources should

be devoted to research which farmers are perfectly competent to (and often do) undertake for themselves. Meanwhile a critical scrutiny of why some research areas are selectively over- or underdeveloped is called for. In abandoning open-endedness and perfectionist research criteria. RRA is forced to confront and come to terms with the politics which underlie any organised body of knowledge. The lessons thus learnt in the rural development field, in the context of operationalising the idea of a 'people's science', would be of general value in the wider context of science as a whole, where the problem of the democratic control of expertise remains a vital issue.

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