

RRA, RAP and PRA: A Note on the Use of Terms

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, - neither more nor less."

Lewis Carroll, Alice through the Looking Glass, chapter 6

The term Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) was first used in the late 1970s, probably in 1978, to describe methods, and combinations of methods, for outsiders to learn about rural life and conditions which avoided two traps: first, the biases of rural development tourism - the phenomenon of the brief rural visit by the urban-based professional; and second, the untimely, costly, and often unusable outputs of traditional respectable investigations through large questionnaire surveys and through prolonged and detailed social anthropological fieldwork. RRA sought to be quicker and more cost-effective than these.

RRA as it began to be described had many antecedents. The term came to be applied to things people were already doing. And many people anticipated and contributed to its development. In parallel with various forms of RRA, agroecosystem analysis was invented and developed from 1980 onwards, especially at the University of Chiang Mai in Thailand (Gypmantasiri et al and Conway 1980). RRA and Agroecosystem Analysis quickly exchanged methods. The fullest expression of classical RRA with agroecosystem analysis is to be found in the proceedings of the international conference on RRA held at the University of Khon Kaen, Thailand, in 1985 (KKU 1987). In this form, drawing on earlier RRA and other sources such as Farming Systems Analysis, it stressed the following aspects and methods:

- * analysis of secondary data
- * semi-structured interviewing, especially with key informants
- * direct observation
- * multi-disciplinary team dynamics and management

Mainly from agroecosystem analysis it also derived:

- * sketch mapping
- * transects
- * analytical diagramming

Other methods were also used, but these were the main ones.

RRA in this general mode was extractive: "we" went to rural areas, learnt from rural people and from what "we" could observe, and then did the analysis and writing up ourselves for our own purposes. RRA in this and similar modes has been and continues to be practised in many different countries, and has been found especially strong for the rapid investigation of defined topics.

Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) was a parallel development in the health and nutrition field. Its origins have been traced back to the work of Susan Scrimshaw and Cloe O'Gara in Honduras in 1981, and its approach and methods

are fully described in the manual Rapid Assessment Procedures (Scrimshaw and Hurtado 1987). RAP draws on the traditions and methods of social anthropology. Its major methods have been:

- * formal interview
- * informal interview
- * conversation
- * observation
- * participant observation
- * focus groups (ibid: 5)

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) began to be used as a term only in the late 1980s. Conway and McCracken (1988) identified four types of RRA, of which participatory was one (the others being exploratory, topical, and monitoring). The term PRA was probably first used in Kenya to describe an exercise undertaken in Mbusyani Sublocation in Machakos District in July/August 1988 (Kabutha et al 1990). In India Participatory Rapid Rural Appraisal was used to describe a similar exercise undertaken with and by the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India) in September/October 1988 (McCracken 1988). Subsequently the use of the term PRA has spread, especially in Kenya, India, and Nepal, where it has tended to replace RRA in common usage.

PRA is distinguished from earlier RRA by the extent to which activities previously conducted by "us" are now carried out either by "them" or with "them", and the extent to which the resulting information is owned by and retained by them. Participatory methods include the following, all in a participatory mode:

- * mapping and modelling
- * transects
- * preference ranking and scoring
- * quantification
- * trend analysis
- * seasonal diagramming
- * causal and analytical diagramming
- * "interviewing" maps, diagrams, animals, artefacts, etc
- * villagers interviewing villagers
- * planning, implementing and monitoring

People are now asking whether RRA, RAP and PRA are the same; whether PRA has replaced or should replace RRA and RAP; and how the various terms can best be defined.

Three basic points can help in trying to answer these questions:

1. RRA, RAP and PRA are only labels. They can mean what anyone wants them to mean. Their meanings can also change over time, as approaches, and mixes, modes, methods and uses change. In many places what is called RRA has been becoming more participatory. There is a mix of extractive and participatory in most if not all activities which are now described as RRA, RAP or PRA.

2. A plurality of terms has a positive side. People who invent their own terms for what they do are more likely to feel pride of ownership, responsibility for quality, and freedom to innovate. So we should welcome the emergence of labels such as PALM (participatory learning methods) (MYRADA), PRAP (participatory rural appraisal and planning), MARP (Methode Acceleree de Recherche Participative) (Gueye and Freudenberg 1991) and the like. Let a thousand flowers bloom, and cross fertilise. What matters is not the labels we use, but creativity, critical self-awareness, embracing error, sharing with others, adopting and adapting new approaches and methods, and striving to do better. All these approaches have added to the menu of methods that can be used by anyone.

3. RRA can include RAP and PRA, or be different from them. Historically, RAP has been a largely parallel but similar movement to RRA. For its part, PRA is different, an outgrowth from and development of RRA and agroecosystem analysis. If we treat PRA as part of RRA, then a new term would be needed for that old-style RRA that was not PRA. To keep terms few, and to sharpen distinctions, I shall treat PRA and RRA as exclusive terms for the rest of this note.

All this said, there remain options about how we see and define RRA/RAP and PRA.

One way is to see them in terms of a continuum, with shifting proportions of extractive and participatory activities, for example as follows:

	extractive approach and methods	participatory approach and methods	total
	*****	-	*****
RRA/RAP	****	*	*****
	***	**	*****
	**	***	*****
PRA	*	****	*****
	-	*****	*****

Over time, there has been a shift in the centre of gravity of activities from the extractive to the participatory, and this appears to be continuing.

Another approach is through verbal definitions and descriptions. Many are possible. Here is a selection:

"RRA is essentially a process of learning about rural conditions in an intensive, iterative and expeditious manner. It characteristically relies on small multidisciplinary teams that employ a range of methods, tools and

techniques specifically selected to enhance understanding of rural conditions, with particular emphasis on tapping the knowledge of local inhabitants and combining that knowledge with modern scientific expertise...."

(KKU 1987:5-6)

RRA is "a systematic yet semi-structured activity carried out in the field by a multidisciplinary team and designed to acquire quickly new information on and new hypotheses for rural development"

(Conway and McCracken 1988: 18)

PRA "enables multi-disciplinary teams of specialists and rural leaders to work more closely together and to understand better their problems, needs, and opportunities....[It] is an excellent tool to bring together, on the one hand, development needs defined by community groups and, on the other, the resources and technical skills of government, donor agencies, and non-governmental organisations.."

(NES et al 1990: 6)

PRA "aims to learn from and with rural people in an attempt to understand their perspective and draw on their experiences. Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) developed as a move away from long, formal, extractive data collection methods in an attempt to achieve a quicker, more accurate understanding of villagers' livelihoods; PRA takes this a step further by increasing the level of villager participation in information collection and analysis."

(Campbell and Gill 1991:7)

My own description of PRA would be close to this last. It would not require a multi-disciplinary team as a qualifying condition, as in the earlier definitions or descriptions: I can see no reason why a single person using the approaches and methods with villagers should not call that RRA or PRA. But it would go further in including learning by rural people as one of the outcomes. My provisional description of PRA is that it is:

" a semi-structured approach and methods for learning from, with and by rural people about rural life and conditions in which rural people themselves share in the gathering, presenting, analysis and ownership of data."

Much of the difference between RRA/RAP and PRA has then been that RRA/RAP have led mainly to ownership and analysis of the information by us, and to action, if any, mainly determined by us; whereas PRA in my description leads to ownership and analysis of information more by them, and to planning, action and monitoring more by them.

But what we are all doing is changing. Practitioners of RRA are quite rightly adopting participatory methods. For example, wealth ranking, which began more as an RRA-type activity, is now more and more preceded by participatory mapping to identify a household list, and sometimes by wealth ranking direct onto the map which villagers have made. Whether this is called RRA, RAP or PRA is a moot question but perhaps unimportant. What matters is whether it is done well, and whether it contributes to a better future.

Some people will, though, still want better rules of thumb to know what to call what. A matrix scoring exercise can help them, and at the same time heighten critical awareness of participation. In any appraisal, activities can be scored by allocating points under the two columns for each line, and then adding the totals, in the following table:

Who Did How Much of What?

	<u>Us</u>	<u>Them</u>	<u>Total</u>
Setting the agenda			
Interviewing			
Mapping/modelling			
Transects/observation			
Time lines and trends			
Seasonal diagramming			
Matrix ranking and scoring			
Causal and linkage analysis			
Putting forward ideas			
Presenting			
Setting priorities			
Planning			
Implementing			
Monitoring			
Owning information			

There are several ways of scoring, and each person could invent her/his own. As a rough guide, if "we" end up with the higher total, we may want to call the exercise an RRA;; if "they" end up with more, we may want to call it a PRA.

Conclusion

In the various senses above, there will always be a need for some RRA which is not PRA. Examples are some emergency relief situations where very rapid assessments and decisions are needed; situations where establishing good rapport is difficult; and investigations of some specialised topics such as soil micro-nutrient deficiencies. In such cases one should not feel defensive for relying mainly on RRA by us rather than PRA with and by them. But for reasons of cost-effectiveness, empowerment, sustainability, and sheer fun and interest, most of the future would seem to lie with PRA.

24 September 1991

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