The techniques associated with Rapid Rural Appraisal are no longer regarded as cheap and dubious; if carried out well they can reveal information of a quality and range which would escape traditional methods. Robert Chambers describes progress with RRA and a new element of participation by the subjects of surveys, the villagers themselves.

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 about and publish the ‘informal’ methods they invented and used. They feared for their professional credibility. They felt compelled to conform to standardized 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 with some sense that it might be a second-best. By the end of the 1980s, RRA methods were more and more eliciting a range and quality of information and insights inaccessible to more traditional methods. To my surprise, wherever RRA was tested against more conventional methods, it came out better. RRA, when well done, has shown itself again and again to be not a second-best but a best.

In establishing the principles and methods of RRA many people and institutions have taken part. An incomplete listing of countries where the methods have been developed is Australia, Bangladesh, Benin, Ethiopia, Fiji, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Perhaps more than any other study, the analysis of agro-ecosystems, pioneered in South-east Asia by Gordon Conway and others, established new methods and credibility. The University of Khon Kaen in North-eastern Thailand has been a world leader in developing theory and methods, especially for multidisciplinary teams, and in institutionalising RRA as a part of professional training. 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, but also to ensure quality, so that when it is done, it is done well.

**Principles**

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 is 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 cross-check answers.

- **Learning from and with rural people**, directly, on the site, and face-to-face, gaining from indigenous physical experience.

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Participatory Rural Appraisal (RRA) draws on several traditions, including the community development of the 1950s and 1960s, the dialogics and conscientization 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 participatory orientation of PRA has given new impetus to the development of methods.

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 once-of. 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, all can see, point to, discuss, manipulate, and alter physical objects or representations. The learning is progressive. The information is visible and public, owned and verified by participants.

To give examples, 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 diagrams, information is drawn 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. To date, rural
people have been found to have a much greater ability to create, understand and use diagrams and models than most outsiders are inclined to suppose.

RRA has many advantages. By transferring the initiative to rural people, it generates rapport, and forces outsiders to learn. It elicits, presents and cross-checks much information in little time. And like much RRA, it is far, far more interesting and enjoyable for all concerned than much RRA, it is far, far more interesting and enjoyable for all concerned than conventional questionnaires. 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. Two NGOs in South India — MYRADA and Youth for Action — have each separately used it over four or five days during which time an outside team camped in a village. In both cases, the PRA concluded with an agreed programme of action by villagers and the NGO. With PRA it is not just a question of shared knowledge, but of shared analysis, creativity and commitment.

**Potentials**

Despite these caveats, the potential is vast, and we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. Already RRA has been used for appraisal and analysis in many subject areas. These include agro-ecosystems; natural resources, forestry and the environment; irrigation; technology and innovation; health and nutrition; farming systems research and extension; marketing; organizations; social, cultural and economic conditions; and a large number of special topics. Many other applications can be expected, urban as well as rural, and in the North as well as the South. In addition, for the 1990s, three major areas of potential stand out.

First, RRA has to date still made rather little impression in universities and training institutes. The University of Khon Kaen is an outstanding exception. Only when many more universities and other tertiary institutions for education and training employ RRA, and a new generation of professionals is well versed in its philosophy and methods, will it finally and securely take root. The potential for applications in training and education remains enormous and still largely unrecognized.

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 can bring them face-to-face with rural people. It can keep them up to date and can correct error. It can provide learning which is intellectually exciting, practically relevant, and often fun.

Third, PRA supports decentralization and diversity, allowing and enabling local people to take command of their resources and to determine what fits their needs. Nothing in rural development is ever a quick fix, when in fact it is quite difficult to do well. RRA is a culture and a set of attitudes, its methods require skill, and some people are better at it than others. The word ‘rapid’ can also be used to justify rushing, and to legitimate biased rural development tourism, when really the ‘r’ of RRA should stand for ‘relaxed’, allowing plenty of time. And above all, there is the danger that the hasty 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 is to make time to find the poorest, to learn from them, and to empower them.

**Dangers**

RRA and PRA face dangers. Like farming systems research, RRA will doubtless be discredited by over-rapid adoption and misuse. The warning signs are there: demand for training which exceeds by far the competence of the trainers available; requirements that consultants ‘use RRA’, and then consultants who say they will do so, when they do not know what it entails; and the belief that good RRA is simple and easy, a quick fix, when in fact it is quite difficult to do well. RRA is a culture and a set of attitudes: its methods require skill, and some people are better at it than others. The word ‘rapid’ can also be used to justify rushing, and to legitimate biased rural development tourism, when really the ‘r’ of RRA should stand for ‘relaxed’, allowing plenty of time. And above all, there is the danger that the hasty 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 is to make time to find the poorest, to learn from them, and to empower them.