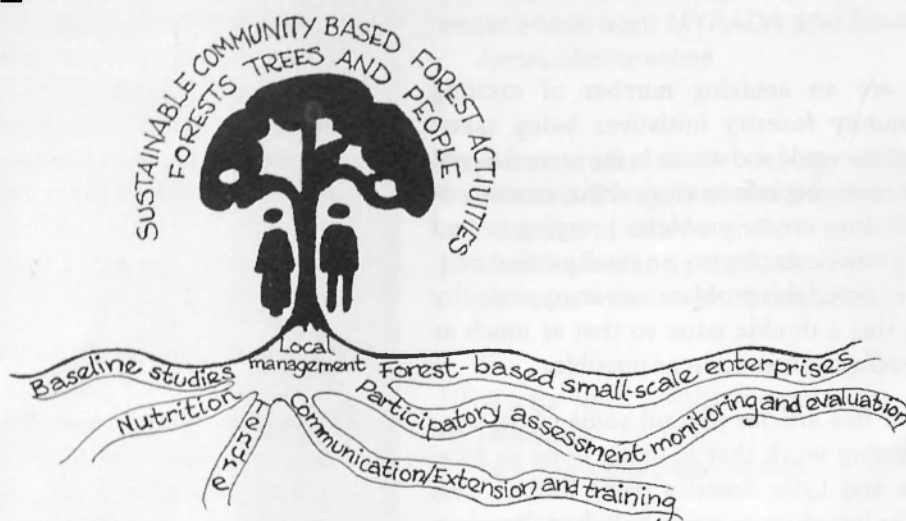


# Participatory rural appraisals; past, present and future



In this article **Robert Chambers** presents a short description of why rapid rural appraisals (RRAs) have evolved into participatory rural appraisals (PRAs) as well as some thoughts on the potential role they can play to make the 90s a decade of empowerment and diversity. His thoughts are based on his recent two years experience in India where he has witnessed and taken part in, what he terms, an explosion of activity and creativeness.

## Introduction

Thoughts on development assistance, during its short history, have evolved through a continuous process. During the sixties few questioned the basic idea that the "developed" world had the answers to the problems facing the poor people of the third world. Attempts to transfer technology directly failed, however, and development workers began to understand that "development" was not that easy. It was decided by these development experts that they themselves needed more information as a basis for identifying the right solutions. Visits were made and surveys were carried out. During the seventies the limitations of these methods both in terms of biased information collected in short visits to rural areas (rural tourism) and of the costs, inaccuracies and delays of large-scale questionnaire surveys became more apparent. As a result more cost effective methods were sought for outsiders to learn about rural conditions and people.

Rapid Rural Appraisals (RRAs) were evolved to solve this problem. They were seen to be cost effective especially for obtaining timely information. They were also the result of the growing recognition by professionals of the obvious fact that rural people were themselves knowledgeable on many subjects that touched their lives. What became known as indigenous technical knowledge (ITK) was then increasingly seen to have a richness and value for the practical purposes of outsiders.

It would be cost-effective to use that knowledge more. The main question, as it seemed then, was how most effectively to tap ITK as a source of information.

By the end of the eighties the RRA approach and methods were more and more eliciting a range and quality of information and insights inaccessible with more traditional methods. When well done they proved to be much more effective than conventional data gathering tools. RRAs freed "outsiders" from the slavery of formal questionnaires and helped them to restrict the type and quantity of information collected to that which was really needed. Another advantage was that they brought outsiders physically into contact with the rural people, creating a situation that allowed for an exchange of information between the villagers and outsiders. This also made it possible for outsiders to identify and meet women, children, the very poor - those who were often missed in formal surveys.

The strengths of RRA can be summarized in the following points:

- It allows for progressive learning which is flexible, exploratory, interactive and inventive.
- It allows for the necessary reversals. Learning from and with the rural people, eliciting and using their criteria and categories, and finding, understanding and appreciating indigenous technical knowledge.
- It allows for one not finding out more than is needed and not measuring what does not need to be measured
- It allows for information to be collected with different methods, sources and disciplines and a range of informants

in a range of places, and cross-checking to get closer to the truth through successive approximations.

- It allows for direct contact between investigators and local people in the field.

### Why participatory rural appraisals?

RRAs began as a better way for outsiders to learn. In answering the question "Whose knowledge counts?" they sought to enable outsiders to learn from rural people and to make use of indigenous technical knowledge to assist outsiders' analysis. Its mode, however, is mainly extractive. Outsiders go to rural areas and obtain data from the local people, bring it away and process it, sometimes to see what they (the outsiders) thought would be good for them (the villagers). The outsider or development worker was still central, the main actor. The knowledge of rural people counted but for the outsider's use. They were the ones that could carry out the analysis and provide the solution.

Recognizing the weakness of leaving this responsibility to the outsiders, PRAs evolved. Outsiders still go to rural areas, but more and more as learners, conveners, catalysts and facilitators. The goal is to enable rural people to do their own investigations, to share their knowledge and teach us, to do the analysis and presentations, to plan and to own the outcome. In a PRA, knowledge is articulated and generated in more participatory ways; in which interviewing, investigations,

transects, mapping and diagramming, presentation and analysis are carried out more by the rural people themselves; in which they "own" more of the information; 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 draws on several traditions including the community development approach of the 50s and 60s and the dialogics and critical awareness raising of Paulo Freire, participatory action research and the work of activist NGOs in many parts of the world. All of these have encouraged poor people to undertake their own analysis and action. ▶



Farmers in Limbu, Karnathaka, planning watershed development using the map they had drawn.

Photo: Robert Chambers

## What is PRA?

PRA in practice has three foundations: methods; behaviour and attitudes; and sharing.

### The menu of methods

In its early days RRA seemed little more than organized common sense. During the 80s more creative ingenuity was applied and more methods invented. During the past few years a great deal of emphasis has been put on finding ways to make these methods more participatory. Although there is much overlap between RRA and PRA methods, RRA methods tend to pay more attention to semi-structured interviewing of individuals and the interactions in an outside team. PRA methods emphasize group discussions and diagramming by rural people and pay special attention to outsiders' behaviour, attitudes and interactions with them.

In the box below a summary list of headings give some indication of the types of methods now known, without being exhaustive:

#### RRA and PRA Methods

- ◆ secondary data review,
- ◆ direct conversation, including wandering around,
- ◆ DIY (do-it-yourself), taking part in activities,
- ◆ key informants,
- ◆ semi-structured interviews,
- ◆ group interviews and discussions,
- ◆ 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.

(Footnote - Some of these methods are described in other articles in this issue. There are also several publications available which describe them in more detail. Information about how to obtain these is presented in the box on page 9)

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, ecological history and flows and causal diagrams. Ranking and scoring methods have been evolved to elicit people's own criteria and judgements. An indigenous and simple example is wealth or wellbeing ranking. In its most common version respondents are presented with slips of paper, one for each household in the community, and asked to place them in piles according to their wealth or wellbeing. These and other methods have been modified and developed, and more will be invented in coming years.

These methods enable villagers to do more of the investigation, mapping, modelling, diagramming, ranking, scoring, quantification, analysis, presentation and planning themselves, and to own and share the outcome.

These methods and materials have been important in enabling villagers' capabilities to be expressed, but



A farmer explains to an "outsider" about the grass he has planted to prevent erosion. Maheshwaran Watershed, near Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh. Photo: Robert Chambers

methods in themselves are not enough. None of these methods will work effectively if the approach is wrong. The approach depends on the attitude and behaviour of the outsiders and their ability to facilitate the participation of villagers.

#### Behaviour and attitudes - the primacy of rapport

The key to facilitating such participation is rapport. At first sight, it is a mystery why it took until the 1990s to discover the richness of the knowledge, creativity and analytical capacity of 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 at them, holding sticks and waving fingers, or have interviewed them, asking rapid questions, interrupting and not listening beyond immediate replies. "Outsiders" lecturing and interviewing are much of the problem. The apparent ignorance of rural people is then an artificial product of "outsiders" 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
- patience, wandering around, not rushing, and not interrupting
- humility
- materials and methods that empower villagers to express and analyse their knowledge.

#### 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, ie. done only once. The information becomes personal and private, owned by the interviewer and unverified. The way the outsider interprets the information supplied is not presented to the villagers. The supremacy of being literate is confirmed and puts people in their "places". In contrast, with the 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 (and will if the right situation is created) see, point to, discuss, manipulate, and alter physical representations or objects. Triangulation and cross checking 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 materials have the advantage of being "theirs" - media which the villagers can command and alter with confidence.

#### Future opportunities

Much of the future lies 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 ▶



An old woman who lives near Medak, Andhra Pradesh, explains how the amounts of different types of food she has eaten as a girl (row furthest from her) and now (row near her hand) has changed. The piles represent (from closest to the camera) millets and coarse grains, sorghum, rice and ration rice. Photo: Robert Chambers

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 a process of identifying development actions by and with villagers in domains that include watershed management, social forestry, credit, horticulture, and marketing and cooperative development. The PRA 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.

For the 90s three potentials stand out.

First PRA has to date still made little impression in universities and training institutes. In India it is key training institutes rather than universities which have started to adopt and develop PRA especially for the village fieldwork of their students, liberating them from the slavery of the survey questionnaire. Only when many more universities and other tertiary institutions for education and training employ RRA and PRA and when a new generation of professionals well versed in their philosophy and methods will they finally and securely take root. The potential for application in training and education remains enormous and still largely unrecognized.

(Note from the editor: In a recent letter to FIPP, network member Karen Schoonmaker Freudenberger writes "The Institut de Science et l'Environnement at

the University of Dakar, Senegal, has decided to incorporate RRA training into its programme and to encourage its use in field studies. I understand that they recently held a workshop for their staff and plan to incorporate RRA into the curriculum over the next year or so.")

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 experience 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 decentralization 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 in a development analysis and 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 90s and beyond, it does present promise. To make the 90s a decade of local empowerment and diversity, PRA could have a key role to play. □



The people of Kistagiri village, Andhra Pradesh, discuss the seasonal diagram they have drawn on the floor with chalk. An "outsider" facilitates these discussions.

Photo: Robert Chambers



"Handing over the stick" - A farmer explains different methods of ploughing to an "outsider" by diagramming with a stick on the ground. Maheshwaran Watershed near Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh. Photo: Robert Chambers

