Rapid and participatory rural appraisal

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1 INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed a quiet methodological revolution in rural research and action, both in theory, and increasingly in practice.* This is the now familiar reversal from top down to bottom up, from centralised standardisation to local diversity, and from blueprint to learning process. One part of this has been a shift in modes of learning, from extractive survey questionnaires to participatory appraisal and analysis. Prominent in this shift have been two families of approaches and families of methods, often called in English rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and participatory rural appraisal (PRA), and in French *méthode accélérée de recherche participative* (Gueye & Freudenberger 1991). The purpose of this paper is to outline the history, principles and methods of RRA and PRA, and to examine their potential for the future.

2 RRA: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The philosophy, approaches and methods known as rapid rural appraisal (RRA) began to emerge in the late 1970s. It had three main origins.

The first was dissatisfaction with the biases, especially the anti-poverty biases, of rural development tourism – the phenomenon of the brief rural visit by the urban-based professional. These biases were recognised as *spatial* (visits near cities, on roadsides, and to the centres of villages); *project* (where projects were being undertaken, often with special official attention and support); *person* (meeting men more than women, elites more than the poor, the users more than the nonusers of services, and so on); *seasonal* (going in the dry and cool rather than hot and wet seasons, which are often worse for poor rural people); and diplomatic (where the outsider does not wish to cause offence by asking to meet poor people or see bad conditions). These could combine to hide the worst poverty and deprivation.

The second origin of RRA was disillusion with the normal processes of questionnaire surveys and their results. Repeatedly the experience was that questionnaires were too long, a headache to administer, a nightmare to process and write up, unreliable in quality of data obtained, and liable to lead to reports, if any, which were long, late, boring and difficult to use.

The third origin was more positive. Seeking more cost-effective methods of learning was helped by the growing recognition by outsider 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.

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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.

In the late 1970s, more and more professionals were inventing and using methods that were quicker and more cost effective than those of "respectable" questionnaire surveys; but they were reluctant to write about what they did, fearing for their professional credibility. They felt compelled to conform to standard statistical norms, however costly and crude their applications, and in their publications to use normal professional categories and measures, not those of rural people.

In the 1980s, this situation was transformed. The family of approaches and methods known as rapid rural appraisal (RRA) gained increasing acceptance. There was increasing recognition that it had its own principles and rigour. In the early 1980s, RRA was argued to be cost effective, especially for gaining timely information, but still with some sense that it might be a second best. But by the end of the 1980s, the RRA approaches and methods were frequently eliciting a range and quality of information and insights inaccessible through more traditional methods. Unless rushed and unselfcritical, RRA came out better wherever it was tested against more conventional methods. In any contexts and for many purposes, RRA, when well done, showed itself to be not a second best but a best.

In establishing the methods and principles of RRA many people and institutions took part. An incomplete listing of countries where they were developed includes 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 Chieng Mai and elsewhere (Gypmantasiri *et al* 1980; Conway 1985), established new methods and credibility. In the mid-1980s, the University of Khon Kaen in Thailand was world leader in developing theory and methods, especially for multidisciplinary teams, and in institutionalising RRA as a part of professional training. In specialised fields, too, there were parallel and overlapping developments. In health and nutrition, rapid assessment procedures (RAP) (Scrimshaw & Hurtado 1987) drew on social anthropology and were practised in at least 20 countries. In agriculture, some practitioners of farming systems research and extension innovated with lighter, quicker methods in an RRA style. And "hard" journals began to publish papers on RRA and RRA applications.

RRA began as a better way for outsiders to learn. In answering the question "whose knowledge counts?" it sought, and still seeks, to enable outsiders to *learn from rural people*, and to make use of indigenous technical knowledge to assist outsiders' analysis. But its mode is mainly extractive; the knowledge of rural people counts – for our use. In the late 1980s, some RRA moved beyond this in a participatory direction, and evolved into what has come to be called participatory rural appraisal (PRA). All the same, for some purposes and conditions, elements of the old RRA will remain. Since its principles and methods are also basic to PRA, it is with RRA that we will start.

3 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 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 especially women, and learning their concerns and priorities
- 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

4 THE MENU OF RRA METHODS

In its early days, RRA seemed little more than organised commonsense. During the 1980s, though, creative ingenuity was applied and more methods invented, some of which are not obvious, and go beyond commonsense and common expectations (Chambers 1980). A summary listing of headings can indicate the types of methods now known, without being exhaustive:

- secondary data review
- direct observation
- transects and group walks
- DIY (doing-it-yourself, taking part in activities)
- key informants
- semistructured interviews
- group interviews and discussions
- chains (sequences) of interviews
- key indicators
- workshops and brainstorming
- sketch mapping
- aerial photographs
- diagramming
- wealth ranking
- other ranking and scoring
- measurement and 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 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 classic 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 (Grandin 1988; Scoones 1988; Shah 1990; Swift & Umar 1991). These and other methods have been modified and developed, and more will be invented in coming years.

5 PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL (PRA)

There is no sharp line between RRA and PRA: they have many principles and methods in common; but old-style RRA and recent PRA are different enough to justify different names.

PRA has increasingly *shifted the initiative from outsider to villager.* It has developed rapidly. Any summary of its evolution is likely to omit 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 that have encouraged poor people to under-

take 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 with Clark University, USA (Kabutha & Ford 1988), and PRA has been spreading in Kenya. Participatory rapid rural appraisal was the term used to describe a joint exercise of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India) (AKRSP) and the International Institute for Environment and Development in Gujarat in 1988 (McCracken 1988). Since then, PRA has evolved and spread rapidly in the NGO sector in India, with MYRADA, based in Bangalore, taking a leading role, together with Action Aid, AKRSP and others; and it is evolving in parallel and spreading through sharing in other countries.

The major difference between PRA and old-style RRA (from now on described simply as RRA) *is in roles, behaviour and attitudes.* In RRA the outsiders – "we" – are dominant. We determine the agenda, extract information, analyse it, and plan. In PRA, these roles are largely reversed. We allow and encourage "them" to be dominant, to determine more of the agenda, to gain, express and analyse information, and to plan. We are facilitators, learners and consultants. Our activities are to establish rapport, to convene and catalyse, to enquire, and to choose and improvise methods for them to use. We watch, listen and learn. Metaphorically, and sometimes actually, we "hand over the stick" that symbolises authority.

"They" then do many of the things we formerly did (and believed, often enough, that only we could do). They make maps and models; they carry out transects and observe; they investigate, observe and interview; they diagram and analyse; they present information; they plan. In consequence, they are more in command of investigation, they own and retain more of the information, and they identify the priorities.

The participatory orientation of PRA has given new impetus to the development of methods. One of the delights of PRA has been the lack of blueprint and the openness to innovation. Participation generates diversity; villagers play a part in interpreting, applying, and sometimes inventing the methods themselves. Villagers and outsiders alike are encouraged to improvise.

In consequence, the two years to mid-1991 have witnessed an explosion of creativity, especially but not only in India and Nepal. Reviewing the range of participatory innovation by colleagues in India and Nepal, six points stand out as "discoveries", at least for me.

(a) Villagers' capabilities

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

Participatory mapping and modelling (Mascarenhas & Kumar 1991) have been the most striking finding. An earlier work on mental maps (Gould & White 1974) did not reveal the richness of detail and discrimination expressed recently by villagers in India and elsewhere through participatory mapping. It may be that, in general, rural people in the South have more extensive and detailed mental maps than urban people in the North. Given the right conditions and materials, they have shown that they can express them visibly on the ground or on paper, either as maps or as three-dimensional models (for example of watersheds). In India and Nepal alone, they have now created hundreds such maps and models, usually showing the huts and houses in a village (a social map) or the surrounding village area (a resources map). Most recently they have been indicating social details, using seeds, colour codes, and markers such as bindis (the small spots women place on their foreheads). These are placed on the maps or models to indicate for each household the numbers of men, women, and children, wealth/poverty, the handicapped, immunisation status, education, and much else. An informed group

or person can conduct their own census of a small village directly onto a map in a fraction of an hour; and much other information can be added spontaneously, or 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. These have now been explored through seasonal analysis and through many exercises of quantification. For example, a careful and fascinating comparison of farmers' estimates of monthly rainfall with those of a nearby agricultural research station in Nepal (Gill 1991) has found the farmers' knowledge and estimates to fit closely and in some respects to be superior.

Various methods of ranking, and more recently of scoring, have also proved powerful sources of insight. We, outsider professionals, have been taught to value absolute against relative or comparative quantification, and to identify 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 requiring absolute values.

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

(b) 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 abilities of villagers. But when the widespread beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of outsiders are considered, there is less mystery. Outsiders have been conditioned by their education and the social structure of knowledge to believe and assume that villagers are ignorant. Outsiders have then either lectured them, holding sticks and wagging fingers, or have interviewed them, asking rapid questions, interrupting, and not listening beyond immediate replies. "Our" lecturing and interviewing have been much of the problem. It has made the ignorance of rural people an artifact of our ignorance, of our not knowing how to enable them to express, share and extend their knowledge:

The attitudes and behaviour of outsiders needed for rapport, and which have been missing, include:

- participation by the outsider in rural and village activities
- respect for rural people
- interest in what they have to say and show
- patience, wandering around, not rushing, and not interrupting
- humility
- materials and methods that empower rural people to express and analyse their knowledge

(c) 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, and can be 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 that villagers, whether literate or illiterate, can command and alter with confidence. The diagram also can provide an agenda for discussion that is theirs.

(d) Sequences

Some participatory methods have been known and used in the past (Rhodes 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 or wellbeing ranking follows easily and well from a village social map that provides an up-to-date household listing; the ranking also can be done direct onto the map.
- 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, what is observed and discussed leads into the identification of problems and opportunities, and discussions of what might be done and by whom.

In such ways as these, participatory methods fit well with a flexible learning process approach that is more open-ended and adaptable than some earlier RRA; and they have the advantage that they usually enable villagers to use their own categories and criteria, to generate their own agenda and assess and indicate their own priorities.

(e) Training and reorientation for outsiders

RRA training conducted in Thailand in 1990 took six weeks, which was considered inadequate. In India, some has taken only one day, by concentrating sharply on behaviour and attitudes; but most PRA training in India has taken three to five days spent camping in a village.

The three to five day camp usually entails two processes: training and learning for the team of outsiders, using various methods; and a participatory process that is "for real", leading to plans developed by and with villagers. Staying a number of nights in the village intensifies and concentrates the experience. Attention is given 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 do 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 creativity of the outsider and that of the villager is released.

(f) 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, seems increasingly important. This is partly because it has become the mode in which PRA spreads. PRA in India has a culture of sharing that 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 (Mascarenhas 1990), or wealth ranking (Chambers 1991) for example – now takes several different forms and is done differently in different places. To share and exchange methods and experiences, interchanges of staff appear efficient, with staff of one organisation spending time with other organisations in their PRAs. In all cases, also, the creativity and inventiveness of villagers can come into play. In such ways, innovations can be continuously stimulated, shared and spread.

6 DANGERS

Four dangers stand out.

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 that exceeds by far the tiny cadre of competent trainers; 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 but not experienced and used them; and the belief that good RRA or PRA are simple and easy, quick fixes, when they are not.

The second danger is *rushing.* The word "rapid", necessary in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is now sometimes a liability, in danger of being used to legitimate hurried and biased rural development tourism. The R of RRA might better stand for "relaxed", allowing plenty of time. One danger here is that hurry or lack of commitment will mean that the poorest are, 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.

The third danger is *formalism.* In the long term, this may prove the most difficult. With any innovation, there is an urge to standardise and codify, often in the name of quality. Manuals are called for and then composed. They can indeed be useful as compilations of experience, as cookbooks that widen the choice of recipes, as sources of ideas, especially for trainers. But manuals also can hamper. With any new approach or method, manuals start short but grow fast. Paragraphs proliferate as intelligent authors seek to cater for every condition and guard against every eventuality. Some farming systems research gave rise to manuals the

weight of which itself became a problem. The dangers are evident. Training is based on the lengthening text, and takes longer. More time is spent in formal classroom teaching of the theory and less in the field on the practice. Spontaneity is inhibited, adoption deterred, and spread slowed or at worst even stopped.

The initial lack of a manual for PRA in India has then been an advantage. Would-be practitioners have been forced to learn, not from books, and not in the classroom, but from colleagues, through sharing, and from their own improvisations and experiences in the field. Many of the best innovations have happened when practitioners have not followed the rules. Matrix scoring came about when someone broke the supposed rules for matrix ranking and asked participants to score instead. The first guidelines for wealth ranking (Grandin 1988) presented individual interviews in private as the preferred method, but many practitioners have now found ways of using group interviews; by mid-1991, MYRADA, an NGO in India, had conducted over two hundred wealth rankings by groups. Neither has the criterion for ranking remained some concept of "wealth". More commonly now, a more complex implicit concept of wellbeing, as defined by rural people themselves, is used.

The largest and heaviest manual in India is that produced by Ravi Jayakaran of Krishi Gram Vikas Kendra. The reader opens it to find printed boldly on the first page:

USE YOUR OWN BEST JUDGEMENT AT ALL TIMES

The other pages are all blank.

The lesson is that practitioners must take responsibility for what they do. They 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, that can best assure quality and creativity.

A linked, fourth, problem is *routinisation*. Practitioners and trainers fall into habits and ruts. There are many different ways of doing participatory mapping and modelling, transects, seasonal analysis, group interviews, ranking and scoring, identifying special groups of people, and the like. But practitioners in any organisation, or even region, tend to slip into standard practices that miss most of the options. Of course, some routinisation and repetition are inevitable, even desirable. But experimenting, inventing, testing, adapting and constantly trying to improve are part of the potential strength of PRA. To nurture and keep that spirit, one means is exchanges of trainers between organisations, countries and continents, to share approaches, methods and experiences in the field.

7 POTENTIALS

Despite these dangers, the long-term potentials of both RRA and of its newer form in PRA, do not seem small.

Concerning RRA, adoption in most countries has been only on a tiny, localised, scale, and usually only by NGOs. But the range has been wide: already an RRA approach and methods have been used for appraisal and analysis in many subject areas. To name but some, these include agroecosystems; natural resources, forestry and the environment; irrigation; technology and innovation; health and nutrition; education; farming systems research and extension; pastoralism; marketing; disaster relief; organisation and management; and soil and water conservation. Many special topics have been explored. The purposes have included assessment of social, cultural and economic conditions, project identification and appraisal, monitoring and evaluation, ad hoc topic investigation, and academic research. Many more uses can be expected, urban and rural; in the North and the South.

It is, though, with the more participatory approach and methods of PRA that much of the future seems to lie. It has strong points. By transferring the initiative to rural people,

it both requires and generates rapport, and forces outsiders to learn. It elicits, presents and cross-checks information quickly. 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 that include agricultural research, watershed management, social forestry, credit, horticulture, marketing, and 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 gains to people through their sharing of knowledge with each other, but also gains in their ability to analyse their creativity and their commitment.

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

First, there is scope for RRA and PRA in universities and training institutes, in most of which they have been quite strangely overlooked. The potential for applications in training and education remains enormous and is still largely unrecognised. Exceptions include a few universities in Thailand and the Philippines that use RRA, making it important to learn why and how they came to adopt it. Also, in the early 1990s, key training institutions in India have started to adopt and develop the PRA approach and methods, including the National Academy of Administration at Mussoorie, which trains the senior cadres of the civil service. These training institutions are using PRA methods in the village fieldwork of their students, liberating them from the earlier slavery of the survey questionnaire.

But the scale of adoption of RRA and PRA in universities and other tertiary institutions for education and training is still only minuscule compared with the scope. Only when many more introduce RRA and PRA into their curricula, teaching and fieldwork, and when a new generation of professionals is well versed in the philosophy and methods, will RRA and PRA finally and securely achieve anything close to their potential.

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 that is decades out of date. RRA/PRA can bring them face-to-face with rural people. Minisabbaticals in villages are being discussed. Experience to date in India has been that senior officials 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 that 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 decide what fits their needs. By involving them from the very beginning of a development action, it can enable them to own it more; it thus can contribute to commitment and sustainability. It is part of the paradigm for rural development that stresses process, participation, local knowledge, and reversals of learning. To make the 1990s a decade of local empowerment and diversity, participatory rural appraisal should have a key part to play.

But nothing in rural development is ever a panacea; and PRA faces problems of spread, scale and quality assurance. The potential realised will depend largely on practitioners and trainers. The questions are whether embracing error, and using one's own best judgement at all times, can be built into the very genes of PRA; and if so, whether RRA and PRA cannot be just self-spreading, but self-improving.

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