



# Stay the night!

or: who is the expert?

**The interaction between the visiting expert of the North and the receiving host in the South has been neglected. The author gives a fresh input as to how a Northerner should behave in the field and how powerful professionals could step down from their pedestals.**

It is now more widely accepted among development professionals that poor rural and urban people in the South are the experts on their lives, livelihoods and the conditions in which they live. One of the basic tenets of rapid rural appraisal (RRA) has been that this knowledge has been neglected by development professionals, who should ensure that it is expressed and contributes more to the development process. With participatory rural appraisal (PRA), the further step is enabling local people to conduct their own analysis and planning, and to take their own actions. So increasingly, local people

have come to be seen as knowledgeable. And now increasingly, they are being treated and empowered as experts and paid as consultants.

The whole North-South structure of professional and social dominance remains, though, alive and well, and conflicts with these trends. Reversals of learning and empowerment are needed not just at the level of the village or slums, but at all levels. Of these, one of the most neglected has been the interaction between the visiting expert from the North and the receiving host in the South. If the Northern visitor asserts superior

knowledge and insight, this reinforces top-down dominance in the whole system. How then, should Northern visitors behave?

## Better to stay away?

There are common<sup>sense</sup> answers to this question. The most basic is to reflect on whether a visit is really necessary? Most of us, from the North, do not realise the disruption and cost in working time imposed by our visit. Especially if Northern visitors hold the purse strings, Southern hosts feel obliged to treat visits as important. A field visit can take a lot of time for many of the members of the staff. Northern visitors do indeed have responsibilities to those who have provided funds, so visits have to be made. They are also vital for more general learning.

But visits and visitors can be a pain, and some visitors can help by coming less often.

Six precepts for visitors, whether from North or South, might be:

- \* Don't make unnecessary visits.
- \* Double up with other visitors.
- \* Try in advance to minimise disruption to hosts and special arrangements, stressing the unimportance of meals (especially lunch) and comfort.
- \* Limit the pre-set programme. Ask for time to be left for wandering around.
- \* Avoid formality, but where it is wanted and laid on, be courteous and play your expected role.
- \* Don't rush.



Robert Chambers is a scientist and developmentalist with many years of experience on both documenting and participating in rural development projects. He is well known for having elaborated developmental planning tools, known under the terms "Rapid Rural Appraisal" and most recently "Participatory Rural Appraisal". At present Mr. Chambers is a Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, at the University of Sussex.

It is easier to suggest a code than to follow it. As a Northern visitor, I have failed on every count. All of us, from North and South, make mistakes. The answer is not to give up. It is to keep trying, to embrace error, and to fail forwards.

#### Northern bias

Beyond these precepts, the PRA experience has underlined two other points.

The first is Northern bias, the belief of many Northern organisations and people that the best experts are in and from the North. But the great majority of those with extensive PRA experience are from the South. Northerners are at a disadvantage. Most of them can only have short and intermittent field PRA experiences. Also they usually do not have to live with the results. These disabilities may change as PRA is increasingly adopted in the North, but this has not yet happened on any scale. Then some of us in the North write and publish about PRA, and so come to be supposed to be knowledgeable and experts, even though our field experience is

quite limited. Some North-based organisations will try to recruit a Northerner to conduct PRA training, giving a Northerner preference over more experienced Southerners. Bad PRA has also been propagated by ignorant and arrogant people from the North. In some cases they argued with and tried to overrule PRA practitioners and trainers from the South who know more, and who are closer to the participatory spirit of PRA. The plain fact is that PRA expertise has been developed in the South, most of it by fieldworkers in the South, and the vast majority of the experts in PRA are people from the South. The South is in the lead.

The second concerns behaviour and attitudes. In the early days of PRA, the methods - participatory mapping, matrix ranking and scoring, seasonal calendar, trend, change and linkage diagramming, wealth and wellbeing ranking, time use analysis, and so on - seemed to be the most important element. But then it became clear that "our" behaviour and attitudes mattered more. So "hand over the stick", belie-

ving that "they can do it", "use your own best judgement at all times", being relaxed, embracing error; being nice to people, and other precepts become accepted and spread.

#### Do it yourself

The puzzle has been how to enable powerful professionals to step down from their pedestals, sit down, listen and learn. One key here has been sharing. For personal and professional change, two forms of sharing have proved threshold experience: being taught local tasks; and staying the night. DIY (do it yourself) in which villagers teach outsiders tasks like transplanting, weeding, winnowing, fetching water, thatching, ploughing, mat making, mudding walls, and so on can be a formative experience, and can transform the outsider-insider relationship. Similar, spending nights in villages, instead of rushing back to town, resthouse and hotels, involves a quality of experience, of the whole day and night, and of closeness to village life, quite different from that of the short day visit.

To lay on such experiences

may add yet another burden of organisation on hosts, both host organisation and villagers. For hosts to arrange DIY experiences, and staying the night, for guests, may not always be easy or even congenial. But where they do this, they are being generous. The donor-recipient relationship is reversed. People from the North are helped to experience and understand, getting closer to local reality. The North-South relationship is turned on its head.

To the question: who is an expert? can then be added the question: who is the donor? If the South becomes the donor of experience, the North becomes recipient of an opportunity to learn. Could this be a model of reciprocity for the future, in which donors recognise themselves as recipients, and recipients recognise themselves as donors?