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PRACTICAL APPROACHES AND METHODS

Background Notes for Participants in the Kathmandu 14  
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These notes are a checklist of points for background reference. They are intended to indicate some of the range of the subject, and especially of the many methods now known. Please do not be put off by the length of the lists. They are a menu, not a syllabus!

These notes provide pointers to the history, rationale and methods of rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and of its development increasingly known as participatory rural appraisal (PRA). The earlier RRA was more "extractive": "we" went to rural areas and obtained data from "them", brought it away, and processed it, sometimes to see what we thought would be good for "them". Recently, this has become more participatory: "we" still go to rural areas, but the data are shared, and the analysis is much more by rural people themselves, and they own much more of the outcome.

Some of the methods, especially diagramming, were first developed and practised on any scale in Southeast Asia. But RRA/PRA knows no boundaries. Interestingly, RRA/PRA technology is now being transferred from South to North, with these methods being used in Switzerland and Australia in agriculture and in the UK in health. Kenya was active in developing early PRA, but now South Asia (notably India and Nepal) seems to be in the lead, with methods evolving rapidly, and being continuously invented and developed. I am amazed at how much I have had to revise these notes as a result of the experience of the past two months. People (villagers and outsiders), once unfrozen, enjoy improvising and inventing methods and variants on methods.

**IDS-PRA Reading Room**  
*B: Methods, Tools + Techniques*  
..... **Box**  
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The methods are now spreading rather fast as more people are trying them out and inventing their own variations. Part of the reason seems to be that they so often produce interesting and useful insights, and that they are often liberating and enjoyable. Some are beginning to talk of a revolution in rural research methods (I have a paper by Robert Rhoades on this if you are interested). "Revolution" is a strong word, but change is in the wind. It includes offsetting the worst biases of rural development tourism, liberation from survey slavery, and involving rural people themselves much more as investigators, analysts and consultants, with them taking part much more in the processes of setting priorities, planning and implementing.

Much PRA is enjoyed, both by rural participants and by outsiders who initiate it. The word "fun" is entering the vocabulary that describes some of the experience. "Relaxed" rural appraisal is a better description than "rapid". And the word "appraisal" is a bit out of date now. Participatory learning is closer. "We" learn from "them". They also learn something by teaching us. Much of our knowledge is still useful, but unless we start by unlearning and firmly putting our knowledge, ideas and categories in second place, we cannot effectively learn from them.

Some people with a strong disciplinary training find this reversal of teaching and learning difficult. It is not their fault.

#### Why Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) Originally?

Need - rapid rural change, and the need for good and timely information and insights

Recognising "us" and our confidence in our knowledge as much of the problem, and "them" and their knowledge as

much of the solution

Rural development tourism - anti-poverty biases (spatial, project, person, seasonal, courtesy, professional...), and being rapid and wrong

The insulation, isolation and out-of-date experience of senior and powerful people

Survey slavery - questionnaire surveys which take long, mislead, are wasteful, and are reported on, if at all, late

The search for cost-effectiveness, recognising, trade-offs between depth, breadth, accuracy, and timeliness, assessing actual beneficial use of information against costs.

Some Core Principles and Practices

- \* rapid progressive learning - flexible, exploratory, inventive
- \* reversals - learning from, with and by rural people, eliciting and using their criteria and categories, and finding, understanding and appreciating ITK (indigenous technical knowledge)
- \* optimal ignorance, and appropriate imprecision - not finding out more than is needed, not measuring more accurately than needed, and not trying to measure what does not need to be measured. Often trends, ranking or scoring are all that are needed for practical purposes, but we have been trained to seek absolute measurements.
- \* triangulation - using different methods, sources and disciplines, and a range of informants in a range of places, and crosschecking to get closer to the truth through successive approximations

- \* principal investigators' direct contact, face to face, in the field
- \* critical self-awareness, doubt, embracing error

Some Problems and Dangers

- \* how to find the poorer, and learn from and with them  
(This was last on the list. Should it be first?)
- \* LECTURING INSTEAD OF LISTENING AND LEARNING (Is this problem worse with men than women, worse with older men than younger, and worst of all with those who have retired? (Remind me to outline the ERR hypotheses (Who holds the stick? Who wags the finger? Who teaches? Who learns?))
- \* senior people who do not want to spend time in the field (but the Chief Secretary, Government of UP, has recently issued an order requiring all IAS officers with over 16 years service to sleep one night a month in a village)
- \* rushing (rapid and wrong again)
- \* imposing "our" ideas, categories, values, without realising we are doing it, making it difficult to learn from "them", and making "them" appear ignorant when they are not
- \* normal professional pressures, including the tyranny of (bad, not good) statisticians, the desire for formal statistical respectability, and the compulsion to measure things rather than just compare, rank, score, identify trends...
- \* wanting to be snug and safe in the warm womb of a preset programme and method
- \* finding the questions to ask! (We assume we know what to ask. The beginning of wisdom is to realise how often we do not know, and to recognise that we need "their" help)

- \* male teams and neglect of women (again and again and again and again and again and...) (How many women in our seminar?)
- \* LECTURING INSTEAD OF LISTENING AND LEARNING. Yes, it needs repeating. It can be a personal problem of which we are unaware.

#### Approaches and Methods

"Approach" is basic. If our attitudes are wrong, many of these methods will not work well. Where attitudes are right and rapport is good, we can be surprised by what villagers show they know, and what they can do.

Don't be put off by the length of this list. Probably no one in the world has used all these methods. The purpose of listing them is to show that the menu is rich in variety, and that there is much to try out and explore.

Many of you will already have used some of these. Some are plain commonsense and common practice. Others are ingenious and not obvious. Some are quite simple to do. Others need training and practice. All need appropriate attitudes. Here they are:

- \* offset the anti-poverty biases of rural development tourism (spatial, project, person, seasonal, courtesy...)
- \* find and review secondary data. They can mislead. They can also help a lot. At present, for the sake of a new balance, and of "our" reorientation and "their" participation, secondary data are not being heavily stressed.
- \* observe directly (see for yourself) (It is amazing how much we often do not see)
- \* do-it-yourself, supervised and taught by them (washing clothes, cooking, sweeping and cleaning, fetching

- water, weeding, ploughing, digging compost, lifting water...) (ouch! ahha! or fun, or some of each?)
- \* find key informants. Ask: who are the experts? So obvious, and so often overlooked
  - \* semi-structured interviewing. Some regard this as the "core" of good RRA. Have a mental or written checklist, but be open to new aspects and to following up on the new and unexpected
  - \* groups (casual/encounter; focus/specialist; deliberately structured; community/neighbourhood). Group interviews are often powerful and efficient, but we have neglected them because of our obsession with counting through individual questionnaire-based interviews
  - \* sequences or chains of interviews - from group to individual key informant etc etc
  - \* local researchers - school teachers, students, poor people. "They" do transects, observe, interview other villagers. Still a frontier
  - \* participatory mapping and modelling - aerial photographs and overlays, people's mapping and modelling, drawing and colouring on the ground or on paper to make social maps (of the residential part of a village), resource maps of a village or other area such as a forest, maps of fields, farms, home gardens, or topic maps (for water, soils, trees etc etc), 3-D models of watersheds etc
  - \* participatory transects - systematically walking with key informants through an area, observing, asking, listening, discussing, identifying zones, seeking problems, solutions, opportunities, and mapping and/or diagramming resources and findings. Transects now take many forms - vertical, loop, nalla, combing...

- \* time line: a history of major remembered events in a village with approximate dates. A good icebreaker, and a good lead into
- \* local histories: people's accounts of the past, of how things close to them have changed, ecological histories, histories of cropping patterns, changes in customs and practices, changes and trends in population, migration, fuels used, education, health... and causes of these
- \* seasonal diagramming - days of rain, amount of rain, soil moisture, crops, agricultural labour, non-agricultural labour, diet, food consumption, sickness, prices, animal fodder, fuel, migration, income, expenditure, debt etc etc
- \* livelihood analysis - seasonality, crises and coping, relative income, expenditure, credit and debt, multiple activities...
- \* participatory diagramming, estimating and analysis - bar diagrams, visible estimating using seeds, pellets, fruits, stones etc, pie diagrams, chapati diagrams, etc, causal diagramming and analysis...
- \* wealth ranking - identifying clusters of households according to wealth or wellbeing, including those considered poorest or worst off. A good lead into discussions of the livelihoods of the poor and how they cope
- \* ranking and scoring - especially pairwise ranking, and direct matrix ranking and scoring. Innovations in the past few weeks confirm that these are versatile methods for eliciting and learning "their" categories, criteria, priorities and choices...
- \* local indicators, e.g. what are poor people's criteria of wellbeing, and how do they differ from those we assume for them?
- \* key probes: questions which can lead direct to key issues

such as - "what do you talk about when you are together?" "What new practices have you or others in this village experimented with in recent years?" "What (vegetable, tree, crop, crop variety, type of animal, tool, equipment...) would you like us to look for and obtain for you to try out?".....

- \* case studies and stories - a household history and profile, a farm, coping with a crisis, how a conflict was or was not resolved.....
- \* rural people's own analysis, priorities, futures desired, choices etc. A frontier on which many outsiders have experience, but where much remains to be learnt and shared about approaches and methods.
- \* team interactions - changing pairs, evening discussions, mutual help, etc where the team may be just outsiders, or a joint team with villagers
- \* shared presentations and analysis, where maps, models, diagrams and findings are presented to villagers and outsiders. Brainstorming, especially joint sessions with villagers. But who talks? Who talks how much? Who interrupts whom? Whose ideas dominate? Who lectures? So (yes, again, and without apology) LISTEN, LEARN, FACILITATE. DONT DOMINATE! DONT INTERRUPT!
- \* contrast comparisons - asking group A why group B is different or does something different, and vice versa.
- \* questionnaires. If at all, let them be late, light and tight, tied to dummy tables. NOT long questionnaires, and NOT early in the process, unless for a sharp and narrow purpose
- \* report writing then and there. Easier said than done. But remember the files and queues of supplicants waiting when you get back. Will the report sit in the I-will-do-it-next-week-when-there-will-be-more-



time box, and silt over with layers of later papers?  
And even if you do get round to it, how much will  
you have forgotten after the lapse of time?

Practical Tips

- \* Don't lecture. Look, listen and learn. (Again?). And don't interrupt. When they are mapping, modelling or diagramming, let people get on with it.
- \* embrace error. We all make mistakes, and do things badly sometimes. Never mind. Don't hide it. Share it with others. When things go wrong, treat it as an opportunity to learn. Say, Ahha. That was a mess. Good. What can we learn from it?"
- \* ask yourself - who is being met and heard, and what is being seen, where and why; and who is not being met and heard, and what is not being seen, and where and why?
- \* relax (RRA = relaxed rural appraisal). Don't rush.
- \* meet people when it suits them, and when they can be at ease, not when it suits us. (Well, compromises are often necessary, but it is a good discipline, and good for rapport, to try to meet at their best times rather than ours); and don't force discussions to go on for too long. Stop before people are tired.
- \* be around in the evening, at night and in the early morning. Stay the night in villages if you can
- \* allow unplanned time, walk and wander around
- \* ask about what is seen
- \* probe (sounds easy, but is one of the most neglected skills, often driven out by actual or supposed lack of time. All too often we accept the first reply to a question as being all that is needed, when there is much, much more to be learnt, and people know much, much more than we supposed)
- \* notice, seize on, investigate, the unexpected.
- \* use the six helpers - who, what, where, when, why and how

- \* ask open-ended questions
- \* show interest and enthusiasm in learning from people
- \* have second and third meetings and interviews with the same people
- \* allow more time than expected for team interaction, and for changing the agenda (I have never yet got this right)
- \* enjoy it! It is often very interesting, and often fun

#### Examples and Applications

These are almost endless. You will have your own needs and ideas. But some are:

- \* starting in a village. Participatory project and programme identification
- \* exploratory learning about rural conditions generally
- \* reversals and renewal for senior professionals and officials
- \* natural resource assessment, agroecosystem analysis, appraisal for watershed development, etc
- \* health and nutrition investigations and assessments
- \* assessing and dealing with emergencies
- \* identifying the priorities and criteria of a group (e.g. landless laborers, poor women, farmers etc)
- \* topic and problems RRAs: investigating a topic or understanding the reasons for a problem - why poor farmers do and don't plant trees, and which trees they would like to have; how poor people spend lump sums of money; home gardens and vitamin A; how people spend their time; historical changes in child-rearing practices; the non-adoption of an innovation; why some children do not go to school, or drop out; historical changes in diet; seasonal deprivation; migration; impact of a road...

- \* identifying research priorities and initiating participatory research
- \* academic research
- \* preliminary investigations for questionnaire surveys
- \* training and orientation (university and institute staff and students, NGO workers, Government staff etc), towards a culture of open learning in organisations
- \* introducing local diversity in otherwise standardised programmes
- \* timely information for government decision-making etc. etc.

#### Frontiers of RRA

##### 1. Participatory Rural Appraisal

- \* outsiders' attitudes and behaviour
- \* participation by the poorer, and by women
- \* resolving conflicts
- \* avoiding expectations and dependence
- \* people's maps, models, diagrams and quantification
- \* combinations and sequences of methods (e.g. social mapping leading to wealth ranking, pie diagramming with seasonal analysis...)
- \* people's own analysis and ideas

##### 2. Orientation, Training and Spread of RRA/PRA

- \* legitimisation of cost-effective methods in the face to conservative professionalism
- \* which organisations - NGOs, universities, institutes, Government departments?
- \* how to combine scale, speed, quality control?
- \* how to spread - learning by doing, training trainers, field not classroom, people discovering for themselves, critical mass, sustainability?
- \* obstacles - how to overcome or bypass institutional; inertia, senior professionals who feel threatened?

- \* how to liberate researchers, and nurture play,  
inventiveness creativity and learning?

3. RRA/PRA in Government Organisations

In the long term, is this the big need and opportunity? For decentralisation, differentiation, and reversals for diversity? Is there a potential here? Is this a fringe phenomenon, a passing fad, or is it something that is coming to stay, grow and spread?

Is this a point of entry for change? Part of an agenda for the 1990s?

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