CHAMBERS, Robert
[RAPID AND PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL
NOTES ON PRACTICAL APPROACHES AND METHODS

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Notes for participants in the Programme on Rapid and
Participatory Rural Appraisal at the Administrative Staff
College of India, Hyderabad, 29 October to 3 November 1990

First of all, welcome!   Jimmy Mascarenhas and I will do our
best during these five and a half days to enable you to
familiarise yourself, or enhance your familiarity, with rapid
and participatory rural appraisal. On the first morning, we
will ask you what you hope to gain from the programme, and we
will adapt what we do to try to fit that. So please reflect on
your hopes and objectives.

These notes may help in that reflection, and also later provide
a practical framework and checklist. The headings indicate some
of the range of the subject, and especially some 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
now often 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 more and more it is rural people who teach us,
and they who present and share the data, do the analysis, and
own the outcome.

Some of the methods, especially diagramming, were first
developed and practised on any scale in Southeast Asia, as part
of agroecosystems analysis, by Gordon Conway and others, and the
University of Khon Kaen in Thailand has been a major source of
innovation and inspiration.   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,
especially in the NGO sector in India. It is probably fair to
say that India is just now the main leader in PRA in the world.
I am amazed at how much I have had to revise these notes as a
result of the experience of recent months, notably trying to
keep up with the innovations of MYRADA in Karnataka, of the Aga
Khan Rural Support Programme in Gujarat, of NGOs in and around
Ranchi, and of various agencies in Nepal, and of the villagers
with whom they have been working.   People (villagers and
outsiders), once unfrozen, enjoy improvising and inventing
methods and variants on methods. With luck, by the end of this
week, we will have learnt yet more - from participants, from
resource persons, and from our field experience.

The hot current question is what potential the approach and
methods have for training institutes and for Government field
organisations. The potentials are being explored, but
necessarily on a modest scale at this stage. On Friday we will
learn about the experiences of the Drylands Development Board in
Karnataka, associated with MYRADA, and of the Forest Department
in Gujarat, associated with the Aga Khan Rural Support
Programme. At this stage, work with and by Government
organisationws has been mainly in watershed management,

forestry, credit and rural development. In the past month, there have been several new requests from Government for training, especially in agriculture. At present, there is still no Government training institution able to meet these requests and needs. Nor has any University been associated with the methodological innovations of PRA. The few NGOs and NGO staff with experience are already overloaded, if not run off their feet, and there are obvious dangers of going too far too fast.

The methods are, however, now spreading on their own. To give just one example, Samakya, a voluntary agency based in Hyderabad, after only the lightest exposure to PRA, has adopted and adapted participatory mapping, and the principle of "handing over the stick", and with good effect. More and more people are trying out the methods and inventing their own and their own variations. Part of the reason seems to be that when done well, with good rapport, these methods work, giving useful and interesting insights, and involving people in doing their own analysis and planning. They are also often enjoyable. Some observers are beginning to talk of a revolution in rural research methods. (A recent paper by Robert Rhoades on this is available in the readings). I do not think we should claim too much, and "revolution" is putting it rather strongly. Let each of us make our own sober judgement.

Whatever that judgement is, you may agree that professional change is in the wind. Some of the more obvious changes which are occuring are offsetting the biases of rural development tourism (which we will discuss, and of which you probably have a lot of experience to share) and liberation from survey slavery (meaning heavy and long questionnaire surveys). Less obvious, and more of a frontier, is involving rural people themselves much more as investigators, analysts and consultants, with them taking more part in the processes of setting priorities, planning and implementing; in short, with them "holding the stick".

Much PRA is enjoyed, both by rural participants and by outsiders who initiate it. The word "fun" is entering the vocabulary and 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 and with them.

Some people with a strong disciplinary training find this reversal of teaching and learning difficult. It is not their fault. We can help one another firmly but sympathetically. And we can amiably tease one another when we slip into "holding the stick".

That is enough prose. Now for some headings and notes.

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, most of them men

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, interactive, 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. We are trained to make absolute measurements, but often trends or ranking are all that are needed.

*   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 originally 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? Who holds the stick? Who wags the finger? Who teaches? Who learns?

(The ERR, which I will explain, is relevant here)

*   senior people who do not want to spend time in the field
(but the Chief Secretary, Government of UP, is said recently to
have 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 are there in our
programme?)

*   LECTURING INSTEAD OF LISTENING AND LEARNING. Yes, it has to
be repeated.   This can be a personal problem which we do not
recognise in ourselves. (It is a problem for me, as you will
discover).   It is best treated as a joke, and pointed out
to each other when we err. Which we all do.

Approaches and Methods

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

Dont 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. There is much
to try out and explore, and much to invent for yourself.

You will already have used some of these methods. Some are
plain commonsense and common practice. Others are ingenious and
not obvious. Some are quite simple to do. Others are less so.
You can anyway invent your own variants. Appropriate attitudes
and behaviour are often the key.   Here are the approaches and
methods:

* 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 heavily stressed; but they can be very useful.

* observe directly (see for yourself) (It has been striking for me to begin to realise how much I do not see, or do not think to ask about. I will show you examples onb slides. One wonders whether university education deskills us. Am I alone, or do many of us have this problem?)

* do-it-yourself, supervised and taught by them (levelling a field, puddling, transplanting, weeding, lopping tree fodder, collecting MFPs, cutting and carrying fodder grass, milking buffaloes, fetching water, fetching firewood, digging compost, sweeping and cleaning, washing clothes, lifting water, plastering a house, thatching........Roles are reversed. They are the experts. We are the novices. We have to learn from them.

* find key informants. Ask: who are the experts? So obvious, and so often overlooked.

* semi-structured interviewing. The Khon Kaen school regards 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 interivews are often powerful and efficient, but we have neglected them, perhaps because of our obsession with counting through individual questionnaire-based interviews

* sequences or chains of interviews - from group to individual key informant, to other informants; or with a series of key informants, each expert on a different stage of a process (e.g. men on ploughing, women on transplanting and weeding..etc)

* local researchers - school teachers, students, poor people. "They" do transects, observe, interview other villagers. A frontier to explore further.

* 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. These methods have been one of the most popular "discoveries" of the past year, and often lead into other questions, "interviewing onto the map" (We will explain)

* participatory transects - systematically walking with key informants through an area, observing, asking, listening, discussing, identifying different zones, local technologies, introduced technologies, 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 or 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
orworst 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 months
confirm that these are versatile methods for eliciting and
learning "their" categories, criteria, priorities and choices...

* key 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 with only the
barest 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? Stuck record?) . And dont interrupt. When they are mapping, modelling or diagramming, let them get on with it...When people are thinking or discussing before replying, give them time to think or discuss.

* embrace error. We all make mistakes, and do things badly sometimes. Never mind. Dont hide it. Share it with others. When things go wrong, treat it as an opportunity to learn. Say "Ahha. That was a mess. Good. Now 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). Dont 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 dont 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 labourers, poor women, farmers etc)

* topic and problem 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; the reality of a Government programme...

* project and programme management - monitoring, evaluation,
reappraisal, ad hoc problem investigation...

* 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

and you may well have others to add.

Some Frontiers of RRA

1.Participatory Rural Appraisal Approaches and Methods

* 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....) (Sequential combinations, especially with mapping first, are proving powerful)

* people's own analysis and ideas

2.Orientation, Training and Spread of RRA/PRA

* legitimation of cost-effective methods in the face to conservative professionalism

* cost effective use of scarce trainers'time

* 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 (especially in universities?)

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

3. The Future of RRA/PRA

In the long term, is the big need and opportunity the use of RRA/PRA in Government field organisation? For decentralisation, differentiation, and reversals for diversity?

If so, where are the trainers? Who will do the training?

Is RRA/PRA a fringe phenomenon, a passing fad, or is it something that is coming to stay, grow and spread, in Government organisations and Universities and training institutes, as well as in NGOs?

Is this a point of entry for change? Part of an agenda for the 1990s? We hope that this week will enable you to make your own judgement about this, and to decide whether RRA/PRA can be of use to you and your organisation in its work.

Robert Chambers

Administrative Staff College of India
Bellavista
Hyderabad 500 049

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