

RAPID RURAL APPRAISAL, PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL AND PARTICIPATORY LEARNING AND ACTION

Although RRA and PRA/PLA are fundamentally different methods (see below), they are included in one File because much of the literature and resource centres overlap.

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1. Rapid Rural Appraisal

Background to the methodology

In reaction to the shortcomings of structured surveys, at the end of the 1970s and in the beginning of the 1980s a series of methodologies were developed to help outsiders understand rural life better in a short time: 'sondeo', rapid reconnaissance, exploratory surveys, informal methods, informal agricultural survey, etc. Their basic feature is 'organised common sense'. Finally, Rapid Rural Appraisal emerged as the most widely used methodology for outsiders to learn about rural life.

Objectives

The objective of an *exploratory RRA* is that outsiders gain qualitative insight into the daily life of different groups in rural areas. The understanding is not sought in the first place by collecting data, although that is part of the process.

Topical RRAs are used to answer a specific research question; for example, what is the position of women in the community, or how do people cooperate in the community?

Description of the methodology

Rapid Rural Appraisals are based on the following principles:

1. quick and cost-effective;
2. multidisciplinary teams (at least social and technical sciences being present);
3. optimal ignorance: don't collect more information than strictly needed; as far as possible the information should come from the people themselves;
4. triangulation: in order to ensure that the crucial information is valid, information from one person is checked by seeking it from another person as well;
5. observations in the village, the houses and the fields are seen as a valuable source of information.

The central idea is that a group of outsiders spends some time in a village and has informal and open dialogues with the people on (all) aspects of their daily life. The group works with (interdisciplinary) teams of 2-3 people who exchange their experience every evening and identify gaps in their understanding. Profiles are made of the respondents (e.g. old/ young/ male/ female /rich /poor /etc.) in order to be better able to understand their ideas. The following day, the composition of the teams is changed and the dialogue with the target groups is continued. A series of tools have been developed to facilitate the interaction between the team and the people. Most commonly used are:

- *semi-structured interviews*: an informal dialogue with farmers, loosely structured by a check list of issues the team wants to address;

- dialogues with *key persons* or *local experts*: the importance of the first is based on their (formal) position and of the latter on their expertise/skills;

- transect walks: walking with a (small) group of villagers along a transect, e.g. from the top of the hills to the centre of the village in the valley;

- group interviews.

A complementary standard tool is the analysis of secondary data.

Relation to project cycle and strategic level

Exploratory RRAs are mostly done during the identification stage of a project when the broad lines of a project have to be defined. *Topical RRAs* can be used during the initial stages of the implementation of a project. It is possible to use RRAs for monitoring purposes or in the evaluation phase of a project, but this is not common.

Resources needed

When outsiders are involved, a period of two weeks is the minimum; three weeks is better, especially if the area is heterogeneous and access difficult. Since the used communication techniques are often new to many of the team members, it is important to take at least two days to train them before going into the field. When external experts are involved, they need to come at least one week before the RRA starts, in order to get a feeling for the situation.

When an RRA is done by regular, experienced staff it is possible to do it in one week, specially when the research topic is well specified and the area is not too heterogeneous.

Strong points

RRA delivers what it set out to do: it assists outsiders to gain insight into the daily life of the members of the target group and their problems and opportunities. Using a series of tools it is able to deliver fairly reliable information in a cost-effective way.

In RRAs the target group is given a voice: they become the experts who explain their ideas and their knowledge to outsiders. The 'dead' and impersonal information of surveys is replaced by personal stories from the people concerned.

Risks

The tools used during RRAs assume that local people are willing to provide the information requested, but in practice people can have several reasons not to do so:

- they can be afraid of all kinds of political complications;
- they can be short of time to explain everything;
- they can be afraid of having to pay taxes;
- they can give desirable answers in order to please the enumerators ('those poor guys who seem to know nothing should not be given too complex answers');
- they can give those answers which they think will assist them to be among the beneficiaries of expected projects (not only the project doing the RRA!);
- they can be afraid to show they do not understand a question or do not know the answer, and so they just make up an answer.

Indeed, these are the same as listed in for structured surveys. There is no reason to assume that with RRAs these problems are less serious than with surveys. In comparison with surveys, RRA teams have a better chance of overcoming these problems. They have more time and possibilities to:

- (a) put the farmer at ease (especially by using non-verbal communication);
- (b) show interest in what (s)he does, e.g. by taking some soil or anything else with a low social value and examining it together;
- (c) discuss things that they observe;
- (d) adjust the dialogue to the specific interest of the farmer;
- (e) cross-check crucial answers of one respondent with that of another.

Although the much used semi-structured interview offers many more possibilities to enter into a normal dialogue than pre-coded questionnaires, the initiative is still with the visitor. Many semi-structured interviews start with such questions as 'How many children do you have and how much land?'. With these questions the respondent will start to wonder what the expert is going to do with this information.

The information as such is meaningless. If there are 8 children and 3 hectares of land, does this mean the family has a shortage of land? In some situations, yes, in others, not at all. So let the farmer talk freely and she will elaborate herself on this issue when she thinks it is relevant.

Often there is only a weak link or no link at all between the results of an RRA and the follow-up activities of projects. Experts can always find reasons to continue doing what they have always done. Since there is no feedback to the people who have been interviewed during the exercise, nobody will ever notice.

The simple fact that an RRA took place raises expectations in the community that they will profit from future project activities, which might not be the case.

The results of RRAs can be misleading when the people whom the teams have met are not representative of the total target population. The following biases are often found:

- more men than women are seen;
- villages close to central towns or good roads are selected;
- better-off farmers are visited more often (they have the time, they do not migrate, they live near the road, etc.);
- farmers involved in projects or applying new technologies are visited more often.

All in all, the weak points in the way RRAs are too often implemented lead critics to the conclusion that RRAs are indeed much quicker and cheaper than the lengthy surveys they have replaced, but that the quality of the results is all too often not much better. In practice many RRAs are still 'extractive'; information is gathered in the villages and the analysis is done elsewhere by experts. Critics conclude that the quality of an RRA highly depends upon the expertise of the individuals carrying it out.

Issues concerning implementation in the SNV context

Variability in poor areas is very high. In a survey in Africa, the main source of off-farm income in 10 villages surrounding a major town was different for each village! However carefully one may select some of these villages for an RRA, the results might not be applicable even in the next village. The same goes for the variation between years.

On the other hand, RRAs can be useful in poor areas where few (if any) reliable data are available. The main problem is not the methodology as such, but the way it is too often implemented. People should be trained in communication techniques before starting an RRA. Ideally, outsiders should restrict themselves to structuring the dialogue according to three direct key-questions only:

1. what has changed over the last few years and what will change in the coming years?
2. what problems are the family facing?
3. how do they think they can solve or circumvent these problems in the future?

More detailed issues should be explored during the dialogue by further probing into the answers given to these key questions. Good probing is a skill which can be mastered only through training and practical experience. It is important to ask people how they think they will solve their problems as this makes it clear that they themselves are primarily responsible for taking action.

Another important issue in the implementation is that one should ensure beforehand that the results of an RRA will actually be translated into an action plan, otherwise the idea will develop that whatever people say, the experts know better.

2. Participatory Rural Appraisal

Background to the methodology

At the end of the 1980s, Participatory Rural Appraisal was developed in response to the too mechanistic and extractive implementation of RRAs. In PRAs the target group is encouraged to learn and the role of outsiders is reduced to a facilitator of the learning process.

Objectives

PRA aims to empower local people by encouraging them to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions and to plan, act, monitor and evaluate.

Description of the methodology

As with RRA it is hard to define what exactly a PRA is (some even prefer not to define it and just refer to "a family of approaches"). PRA shares the basic principles of RRA (quick, multidisciplinary, observations, etc.), yet now it is the local people who are encouraged to analyse their own situation and plan activities to improve it.

The three basic pillars of PRA (and the basic differences from RRA) are:

1. the behaviour and attitude of outsiders, who facilitate rather than dominate;
2. the methods, which are open, group-oriented, visual and comparative;
3. sharing of information, food, experiences, etc. between in- and outsiders.

For the tools used, two issues stand out:

1. *'Handing over the stick'*: instead of outsiders trying to understand the *knowledge* of the local people, PRA tries to facilitate local people to develop their *capabilities*. They collect and analyse the data and propose actions to be undertaken.

2. *Visualisation and sharing*: local people convey their ideas and knowledge in a visual way. In verbal communication, outsiders dominate the dialogue more easily (via eye contact, cross-checking, etc.) than in communication via visual aids. When a map is drawn by a stick in the soil all can contribute, and local people feel more confident than when outsiders try to draw a map on a piece of paper with a pen - a typical tool of powerful outsiders. Sharing also explicitly involves the food and shelter during the PRA.

The most commonly used tools are:

- *participatory mapping*: a group of villagers makes a map of the community. The way they do this and what they find important provide good entry points for discussions about crucial aspects of village life;

- *village transects*: together with a (small) group of villagers the team walks through the village (or another relevant area) and discusses the things observed;

- *ranking*: people are asked to compare units (e.g. families /trees /crops) and to group them according to their own criteria. For example, via pair-wise comparing the importance of certain trees, people find out which criteria they use to assess the usefulness of these. Ranking is also used to stratify the local population, e.g. via wealth ranking. Both the results of the ranking and the criteria used provide entry points for further discussions.

- *historical recalls*: the lifestory of families are recalled and the main events are used as reference points in the analysis of the present situation;

- *calendars*: people indicate how things change over time, e.g. in which months they have to borrow money, when their children get malaria, when the rains are normally expected, etc.

Combining information obtained from all the tools provides the villagers with an explicit picture of their daily life. This not only helps them to start a discussion on their main problems and how to tackle them, it also boosts their self-esteem because they are able to make this analysis themselves.

Relation to project cycle and strategic level

Since PRA seeks to assist local people to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own action plans, in theory PRA should be used only during the implementation of a project. Since PRA aims at people taking action themselves it is most suited for the community level.

Resources needed

The time used per community is usually 3 to 7 days. For follow-up, much more time is needed. If one is serious that a community should take action based on the PRA, one should be available for at least one or more years in order to facilitate the desired changes, if the community asks you to do so.

Experienced manpower is needed for a PRA; the facilitators should be very thoroughly trained. Since a PRA requires a change of attitude on the part of most extension agents or similar field staff, a short training period of one week or so will not be sufficient.

Not much money or many materials are needed.

Strong points

PRA presents a major step forward from RRA. Local people do the analysis and plan for the future. Their own values, needs and priorities are the point of departure. They themselves develop criteria to classify aspects of their life. This not only leads to a better understanding of the situation (for both the in- and the outsiders) and therefore increases the chance for realistic plans, it also generates a much higher commitment of the people to the planned activities.

The many different perspectives on daily reality and the visualisation offer good opportunities to go beyond the most obvious and dominant points of view in the community. The only warning here should be that too much attention to group discussions/ -activities might enable some groups to dominate the discussion.

The methodology is open to modification; everybody can develop new tools and new ways of organising things. This makes PRA applicable in a very wide range of situations. Indeed, it has been used in both rural and urban areas, both in developing countries and industrial countries, in agriculture, in health care and in social programmes.

PRA can also be used to collect data; local people are able to generate and/or collect reliable data which they themselves analyse and use for planning.

Risks

As with RRA there is still a major problem with defining what a proper PRA is and how it should be implemented. The debate on this is lively and as yet unresolved. The social scientists who developed it are invariably disappointed when they see how PRAs are implemented by others. There is quite a lot of literature on what is called 'bad practice'. The social scientists call for a reversal in the thinking of professionals (read 'technical experts'), but apparently have not yet managed to reach their target group.

The following 'bad practices' should be mentioned:

- PRAs are implemented mechanically; the tools are used, but the attitude of the staff and the organisations involved has not been changed;
- the technicalities of problems are taken as crucial, leaving out socio-political issues;
- local diversity is ignored, both in technical issues (e.g. soil units) as well as in social issues (e.g. the different interests of the different social groups in the village tend to be played down in the process);
- a specific aspect of the previous point is that gender issues are often insufficiently taken into account (this issue is addressed in a number of recent publications: Akerkar (2001), Bell and Brambila (2000), Cornwall (2000), Groverman (1992), Guijt and Shah (1998), IUCN (2001));
- local knowledge is often inventoried but not actually used;
- there is hardly any relation between the PRA and the follow-up;
- the team is dominated by outside experts in PRA, leaving the (local) project staff with a report full of good intention but little practical meaning.

These issues are interlinked: too often PRAs are isolated activities. They are not part of a personal and institutional change in attitude towards development and empowerment of the people. The potential of PRAs can only be used within the context of a wider participatory strategy. It is one thing to conclude in a PRA with the villagers that the village leadership is poor, but quite another to facilitate the people in improving it. In PRA literature few tools are found which could be used in translating the analysis into an action plan. Unfortunately the same applies to the newly coined term Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) which is used more and more as a synonym for PRA.

Some critics stress that PRAs are still culturally dominated by the outsider's wish to learn; Mosse (in Okali et al.) sums up:

- notions of informality are culturally defined and situation specific;
- paraphernalia of PRA (charts, maps) may mystify rather than entice participation;
- visual tools are very attractive for outsiders who do not understand the language;

- the collective events emphasise the general rather than the specific, which might be more interesting;
- most PRAs are too technique-led (despite the opposite rhetoric).

In terms of content, PRAs tend to have an 'inward focus'. Much attention is paid to local problems, while issues of a larger scale can easily be forgotten even if these are very important (see a.o. Sellemna, 1999).

Issues concerning implementation in the SNV context

PRA requires people who are well trained in communication skills and in technical issues. Although one can wonder to what extent expatriates fulfil this requirement, for the field staff of counterpart organisations in resource-poor areas this is even more doubtful. In the educational system of most developing countries, communication and analytical skills are hardly taught. This means that whenever one embarks on a PRA a thorough training of the staff is needed. This should be 'on the job training' as the very nature of a PRA does not allow for 'extractive' training; everything must be done to ensure that no PRA is carried out without a proper follow-up.

3. Literature, manuals and websites

Literature

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Videos:

- Poverty Experts, World Bank 1998 Tanzania; applying PRA tools
- Participatory Research with women farmers, ICRISAT, India
- Questions of difference: PRA, gender and environment. A training video. IIED, 1995
- PRA People and Process, IDS, Brighton, UK

Manuals

The most practical and comprehensive manual for PRAs is: Pretty, J.N, I. Gruijt, J. Thompson & I. Scoones. (1995). *Participatory Learning and Action. A Trainer's Guide*. IIED, London, UK

The World Bank Participation Sourcebook (including case studies from 22 countries) is available from: <http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/sourcebook/sbhome.htm>

Another comprehensive manual is: Clayton, A., P. Oakley and B. Pratt (1997). *Empowering People - A Guide to Participation*. UNDP. It can be downloaded from <http://www.undp.org/csopp/paguide.htm>

Resource centres

The RRA methodology was developed by the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex:

IDS: Institute of Development Studies

University of Sussex
Brighton BN1 9RE, UK
Telephone: +44 (0) 1273 606261
Fax: +44 (0) 1273 621202/691647
Website: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids>

IDS offers a range of short and long term courses on participatory development.

Later the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) took the lead and published *RRA Notes (now PLA notes)*, in which many new ideas about PLA are published.

IIED :International Institute for Environment and Development

3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD
tel (+44) 20 7388-2117

fax (+44) 020 7388-2826
e-mail: mailbox@iied.org
website: <http://www.iied.org>

Many other institutions offer training and consultancies in PRA related methodologies, for example:

KIT: Royal Tropical Institute
Mauritskade 63 (main entrance)
P.O.Box 95001
1090 HA Amsterdam
The Netherlands
tel + 31 (0)20 568 8711
fax + 31 (0)20 668 4579
website: <http://www.kit.nl>

Stoas
P.O. Box 78
6700 AB Wageningen
the Netherlands
e-mail: geh@stoas.nl
website: <http://www.stoas.nl>

Stoas offers training and consultancy on demand.

IAC: International Agricultural Centre
P.O. Box 88
6700 AB Wageningen
The Netherlands
tel.: + 31 317 495495
website: <http://www.iac.wageningen-ur.nl>

IAC offers the ICRE course where (elements of) RRA/PRA are included.

Larenstein International College
P. O. Box 9001
6880 GB Velp
The Netherlands
e-mail: info@larenstein.nl
website: <http://www.larenstein.nl>

Larenstein offers courses of several months covering (elements) of PRA

Websites

The websites of IDS (<http://www.ids.ac.uk>) and IIED (<http://www.iied.org>) are good starting points on the web. On the IDS website on participation several recent studies can be found and downloaded: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/information/recentpubkn.html>. This site can be approached from different other Websites and in this way different recent publication turn up. The IDS Working Paper series is extremely useful, specially when one is interested in the development of new concepts.

The *PLA notes* can be ordered via http://www.poptel.org.uk/iied/bookshop/sd_spla.html. For partners in the South it can be free of charge. At <http://www.iied.org/pdf/list.html> one finds a list of all IIED publications which can be downloaded free of charge from IIED. The general site for the IIED bookshop is: <http://www.iied.org/bookshop/index.html>

A very good site is: <http://nt1.ids.ac.uk/eldis/prapra.htm> where several relevant manuals (among others those mentioned above) can be downloaded.

At UNDP <http://www.undp.org/csopp/paguide.htm> one can download: Clayton, A., P. Oakley and B. Pratt (1997). *Empowering People - A Guide to Participation*. At one of the sub-sites (<http://www.undp.org/csopp/CSO/NewFiles/docemppeople6.html>) a lot of pre-1997 literature on PRA and other resources can be found.

At <http://www.rcpla.org> of "The Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action Network" recent news and events can be found as well as links to other sites and guides to participatory approaches on the internet.

For gender and participation the BRIDGE website is most useful:
http://www.ids.ac.uk/bridge/reports_gend_CEP.html

The Website of the Integrated Approaches to Participatory Development (IAPAD) offers a very good sites with relevant links: <http://www.iapad.org/links.htm>. A specific site of the same organisation is <http://www.iapad.org/toolbox.htm> which is dedicated to the PRA tools for Community Mapping with special attention for IT supported exercises like 3D-mapping.

The World Bank has some sites where issues like PRA and participation in general are important. Yet, they are quite often changed (when new jargon come sup). Now it is:
<http://www.worldbank.org/participation>

The meta-website of the FAO on participation (<http://www.fao.org/participation>) is extremely useful. One can find a large number of interesting links to well selected websites.

The same can be said about a site of the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague: <http://www.iss.nl>

The website <http://www.fao.org/waicent/faoinfo/sustdev/PPdirect/PPhomepg.htm> of the Sustainable Development Department of FAO's website features a broad selection of articles and the Report on FAO People's Participation Programme (PPP). More information and full-text material is available in the "Participation in Practice" section. The site provides French and Spanish versions of most documents.

In the last couple of years the Sustainable Livelihood Approach is widely used which incorporates many of the ideas and tools of the PRA school. At <http://www.livelihoods.org> one can find the latest news on this approach. One can find a large number of documents related to this approach at <http://www.undp.org/si/Documents/documents.htm>

Case Study

CLICK [HERE](#) to find a case study on a PRA done in Kondoa district in Tanzania. It is a locally made report of a typical real life case whereby a PRA is done as part of a rural development project. It is not difficult to recognise both the strong and weak points of PRAs as discussed above. The case includes some practical guidelines for a PRA as well as the results of the implementation.

The World Bank Participation Sourcebook (see manuals) includes 22 case studies a range of countries.