

RAPID RURAL APPRAISAL: AN OVERVIEW OF
CONCEPTS AND APPLICATION

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of rapid rural appraisal (RRA) concepts and applications as background to in-depth discussions. The paper falls into three parts: (i) what is RRA and how is it different from other approaches to information gathering; (ii) how and where has RRA been applied; and (iii) what special problems does RRA face as an emerging methodology? This paper is based on a review of selected pieces of an emerging body of literature which is growing month by month. Undoubtedly some important examples of RRA experience were missed in the preparation of this paper and additional examples, as well as critical commentary, are requested by the author.

What is RRA and in what ways is it unique?

Rapid appraisal has been defined for the purpose of this conference as any systematic activity designed to draw inferences, conclusions, hypotheses, or assessments, including the acquisition of new information, in a limited period of time (Grandstaff et al., 1985). Rapid rural appraisal focuses on the management of rural resources and has attracted a growing number of adherents. Despite its relative newness, RRA has already come to mean many different things to different people and runs the risk of generating confusion through competition among protagonists. The surge of interest in RRA has also produced a growing body of literature on RRA methods and applications that risks substituting volume for quality. As a consequence, RRA risks the fate assigned to other 'fashionable' techniques i.e., to pass from the stage of euphoric adoption, to the stage of critical debate and evaluation, to the graveyard of buzz old words in a very short space of time (DeWalt, 1985). Avoiding this will depend on a broad understanding of what RRA can and cannot do, and on the development of a body of theory and concepts that distinguishes RRA from other methods of information gathering and identifies if and when RRA should be applied. ✓

The Context for RRA. As Jamieson (1985) points out, RRA has emerged at a time when the accepted development paradigms are being vigorously questioned by development professionals. The root of the 'old paradigm' is a view of the world as an orderly and understandable mechanism that can be taken apart, piece by piece, and put back together again. Knowledge of the natural order in the world can be

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developed through careful observation and inductive reasoning. As a consequence, it is believed that progress for people can be achieved through the modification of human customs and institutions to conform to our scientific understanding of the natural order.

In the 'old paradigm,' objective thought is separated from the subjective: the motto was 'cogito ergo sum-I think, therefore I am'. In the emerging 'new paradigm' there is a different understanding of knowledge: 'tango ergo disco-I experience, therefore I learn' (Norgaard, 1984). The origins of the 'new paradigm' rest on a view of the world as a system with interacting parts that exhibits processes of communication and control, and maintains itself through feedback. The 'new paradigm' is replacing deterministic predictability with relative probability.

With respect to rural development, the search for a 'new paradigm' is usually described in more practical terms. For example, in the 'farmer-back-to-farmer' model of the Centro Interamericano de la Papa (CIP), training is designed to be action-, problem-, and client-oriented: successful interdisciplinary research must begin and end with the farmer, farm household and community (Rhoades, 1984). In the words of David Korten (1980) successful rural development projects are responsive to beneficiary needs at a particular time and place, and succeed by working progressively to achieve a fit between program design, beneficiary needs, and the capacities of existing organizations. Their comparative success is achieved through a learning process approach that is directly responsive to the context in which the beneficiaries live and development professionals must operate.

Additional expressions of the 'new paradigm' emphasize agricultural research as processes for problem solving for resource-poor-clients (Biggs and Gibbon, 1984), putting people first (Cernea, 1984), and putting the last first (Chambers, 1983). It is against this background of paradigms in transition and respect for the rural poor that RRA is emerging.

RRA also represents a response to practical resource limitations, (scarcities of time, trained manpower and money), to superficiality in rural research and to the limitations of conventional surveys. However, RRA represents an opportunity not only to generate timely information quickly and at reasonable cost but also to provide information that is qualitatively different and linked to action. To these ends, the success of RRA will depend upon its successful institutionalization within action organizations and the rearrangement of incentives to motivate users.

Essential Features of RRA. Rapid rural appraisal includes a range of systematic methods for the generation of new information in a short period of time. RRA is typically a planned group activity conducted largely in the field by teams representing several disciplines chosen according to the focus of the study. The minimal team is a pair, including at least one rural social scientist but is usually larger than this. Field activity is preceded by analysis and synthesis of published and other available data and is carried out

through semi-structured interviews and direct observation, where a major part of the questioning is determined as the interview progresses. Information prepared in advance covers the major features of climate, -soils, agricultural systems, population, language, culture and local economic conditions. Key questions to guide field interviews are based on team discussions of the purpose of the RRA and the data reviewed in advance. Key questions and strategies potentially revised through group discussion in the field as the RRA proceeds.

Questions posed to interviewees who are not necessarily chosen randomly, are supplemented by the direct observation of the interviewers. Interviewers frequently agree in advance on indicators which provide good measures, albeit proxies, of the status of the system under investigation. In addition, numerous other simple tools, many of them graphic, such as maps, aerial photographs, sketches, transects and crop calendars, designed to identify and portray key relationships and patterns simply, are employed.

RRA typically employs 'triangulation', where the observations of team members from their different disciplinary perspectives are brought to bear on particular characteristics of the system being studied. Triangulation also means the application of different methods to the appraisal of a trait e.g. through analysis of existing data, from semi-structured interviews, and from direct observation of an agreed indicator. At the same time, RRA strives to ensure that the perspective of the interviewee is respected. Indigenous knowledge and the opinions of interviewees are not only actively sought but given priority. RRA team members also strive to respect each others' perspectives, reflecting different disciplines and levels of local knowledge.

An RRA has a purpose and is a means to an end. The purpose of an RRA usually has a problem-focus as a tool for diagnosis or evaluation but RRA may be used simply to understand a new situation or environment. RRA's may be employed to identify specific researchable questions by topic or location, or to appraise the effectiveness of a treatment. Clients for RRA include government bureaus, universities, national and international research stations, and training institutes. [RRA does not appear to have been used by the private sector but I suspect that the essence of RRA is deeply embedded in successful entrepreneurship.] RRA's also produce valuable products for practitioners, most notably cross-disciplinary understanding, teamwork and esprit de corps. These indirect products are also vitally important as means to ends.

RRA is not a standardized method but attempts to be systematic in order to be replicable. As such, RRA is neither 'rapid surveying' nor 'rapid participant observation'. Hands-on experience is an essential element of RRA and there can be no 'remote RRA'. At the same time, RRA is not a substitute for other information-gathering techniques. RRA seeks to inform and can complement more conventional surveys or anthropological techniques and may strengthen both of these if applied in advance. Yet when time and manpower are limited, RRA may be a superior alternative to either.

An important aim of RRA is to cope with complexity, diversity and interdependencies, and to recognize the problem and the context of problem-solving efficiently. As a consequence, RRA embodies trade-offs between timeliness and rigor which are not always clear. RRA can pose serious questions for the degree of confidence that can be placed in results. RRA can provide valuable information on ranges and variations in addition to totals and averages. Reliability in RRA is as dependent on the experience of the team as on the research process employed. RRA reliability increases when the team is composed of both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' [i.e., experienced people both familiar and unfamiliar with the location under study], local people and women. As the properties of a system are equal to more than the sum of the parts, successful RRA can generate quantitative and qualitative insights that go beyond the contributions of single disciplines or the products of other research methods. However, it is becoming clearer, as RRA evolves, that there are problems to which RRA should not be addressed.

Applications of RRA

In this section selected applications of RRA in agriculture, nutrition, agroforestry, and health care will be reviewed. In addition, some methodological literature on RRA development will be reviewed concerned with soliciting and recognizing indigenous technical knowledge and developing tools for RRA.

RRA in Agriculture and Rural Development. The majority of published examples of RRA apply to agriculture and rural development with special emphasis coming from farming systems approaches to research (FSAR). FSAR is an approach to agricultural research and development that views the whole farm as a system and focuses on (i) the interdependencies between the components under the control of members of the farm household; and (ii) how these components interact with the physical, biological and socioeconomic factors not under the household's control (Shaner et al., 1982). FSAR attempts to link agricultural research more effectively with resource-poor farmers (Zandstra, 1983). Perhaps the best overview of RRA as a critical component of FSR has been provided by Beebe (1985).

The earliest references to rapid rural appraisal date back to 1978 and 1979, to a workshop and a conference at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. The emphasis here was on the disadvantages of conventional survey methods, the weakness of 'quick and dirty' alternatives to 'long' surveys, and the need for 'quick-but-not-too-dirty' methods. A related issue was indigenous technical knowledge and the value of RRA as a research method for putting the farmer and his/her needs, circumstances and knowledge squarely into the search for new technologies or approaches to management. Much of this is associated with the work of Robert Chambers (1980, 1981) who has focussed more on the 'why' of RRA than on, the 'how' and on the need to reorient research and rural development management if we are to produce well-adapted results that farmers will use dependably.

Significant agricultural research emphasizing how RRA is performed includes the work of Hildebrand (1981, 1982), Collinson (1981), Shaner et al. (1982), and Rhoades (1982). Each of these authors, their colleagues, and their respective agricultural research centres, identify forms of RRA as diagnostic tools in farming systems approaches to research. RRA is seen as a critical first step in FSAR in Latin American, African and Asian contexts for national and international agricultural research. More recently RRA has been proposed as a monitoring technique in FSAR that incorporates elements of extension in all stage of FSAR (Norman, 1985).

RRA in agriculture is carried out under a variety of labels-sondeo, exploratory survey reconnaissance survey, and informal agricultural survey. Each approach is different, structuring time tightly (sondeo) or detailing questions explicitly (CIMMYT's exploratory surveys) but all of the approaches identified are more than 'surveys' in the conventional sense of the word. Some approaches, most notably Rhoades', emphasise the qualitative distinction between RRA as an appraisal process and the characteristics of rapid surveys. However, all these pathbreaking agricultural RRA's include elements of appraisal based on iterative analysis, learning as-you-go, and the incorporation of passive field observations. RRA is appraisal not just quicker data collection.

Influential agricultural RRA's described in the literature of 1980-82 aimed to be problem-solving, farmer-based, sensitive to location, interdisciplinary, qualitative, quick and informative to decision-makers. They took researchers to farmers' fields and educated them there about farmer needs and circumstances, the roles and perspectives of their professional colleagues, and the need to reorient agricultural research agendas.

Since then RRA has been tried and tested by a large number of agricultural organizations to diagnose topics or locational problems (Grandstaff and Grandstaff, 1985), to plan technologies appropriate to farmers (Byerlee et al., 1984), to reorganize agricultural administration (Klepper, 1980), to plan projects (Ellman, 1980), and through the use of the sociotechnical profile to equip bureaucracies for participatory work (de los Reyes, 1984).

The sociotechnical profile developed for use by the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) in the Philippines was designed to help an agency plan which projects to assist in a particular year and how to intervene effectively. In the process of accomplishing these objectives, a highly technical agency has come to appreciate, as never before, the value and importance of social and organizational factors in water management. The sociotechnical profile includes at least 5 instruments for gathering, writing up, analyzing and summarizing data. Some parts of the process require trained interviewers, other parts depend on line technical staff in provincial offices. Throughout the application of the profile there is a focus on issues, semi-structured interviews, selective inquiry, and 'appropriate imprecision'. The principle value of this approach is in the way it employs RRA methods to work within an agency has institutional objectives and procedures that may bear little relationship to its mandate for more effective

water management. The approach appears to work because it is sensitively applied, generates clear guidelines and procedures, includes mechanisms to 'keep things moving', and has a measure of institutional support at a high level.

These studies demonstrate clearly the broad scope of RRA and are beginning to identify specific tools, strengths and weaknesses of RRA aimed at different targets. Grandstaff and Grandstaff (1985) and others have also begun to identify the conceptual and methodological 'core' of RRA based on extensive field experience and progressive experimentation with RRA preparation, field methods, and report writing. Honadale (1982) also highlight methodological issues paying particular attention to the situational character of proxies in the context of capacity-building in agencies. Special attention is given to formal and informal factors that influence the conduct and performance of bureaus and their ability to work effectively with villagers for their benefit. Rapid reconnaissance is seen to provide practical means for appraising and shaping organizations which must respond to many diverse situations. Honadale emphasizes not only reliability versus cost in information gathering but also the impact of different approaches on local capacities for problem solving. Grandstaff (1985) and Grandstaff also identify twenty-one RRA's performed by interdisciplinary teams at Khon Kaen University on a range of topical, location-specific and methodological issues.

RRA in Nutrition. Examples of RRA applied to problem diagnosis in the area of food and nutrition are provided by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) (1982), the United Nation Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (1982), and Tripp (1984). Topical RRA's on unconventional and natural food sources in the diets of rural families are provided by Somnasaeng et al. (1984) and (1985) respectively. Like farming systems, nutritional systems are highly location specific and RRA provides a clear point of entry for precise targeting in applied nutrition. Nutrition studies also tend to focus on relatively poor people in poor rural areas where farm incomes are lowest. RRA in nutrition studies has given emphasis to problems of seasonality, intra-family food sufficiency, women's roles and the importance of so-called 'minor' crops. All of these are important aspects of nutrition not well identified in prior decades of conventional survey research. Information of this kind should enable more precise targeting of nutrition programs and more effective monitoring of program results. Improper targeting of nutrition programs has allowed privileged minorities to capture the bulk of the benefits frequently (Tripp, 1984) and mis-guided interventions can cause irreparable harm.

Streefland and Streefkerk (1982) offer a very candid report of a three-week RRA designed to map out in advance candidate areas for a drinking water project in India. Two experienced researchers, familiar with the area under study (Gujarat) identify both logistical and methodological problems of RRA and their report includes important practical details ("use locally understood concepts and language", "cross-check each other" etc.) as well as methodological questions. Most important of these are questions of validity in RRA (are you measuring what you think you are measuring?) and

reliability (do the answers provided by RRA correspond to reality?). In a postscript to their report written in 1985, the authors raise the issues of tension in RRA fieldwork raised by the presence of officials, errors caused by working to deadlines, and a caution to expatriates not to overstate how much omit experienced people really know.

RRA in Agroforestry. Examples of RRA in Agroforestry are provided in the diagnosis and design (DD) method of the International Council for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF) (1983) and the rapid community appraisal (RCA) of the Bureau of Forest Development (BFD) of the Republic of the Philippines (1984). ICRAF's methods of diagnosis and design fit within an FSAR approach for improvement of existing land use systems through agroforestry. While agroforestry is a collective term for an array of systems of land use that incorporate trees and shrubs with herbaceous crops and livestock, many agroforestry applications are in upland areas on fragile lands. These areas are characterized by ecological and cultural diversity and the employment of traditional technologies. The challenge of development in these areas is to adapt technologies that are not only productive and sustainable but also cost-effective in specific locations where high pay-offs are unlikely. ICRAF also proposes to use its DD methods as a guidance system for projects beyond the diagnostic stage.

Because of its concern for a specific set of land use techniques (agroforestry systems), ICRAF's DD method appear to emphasize checklists and analytical worksheets that are generalizable and can be communicated in writing to potential users, over iterative, narrative techniques. The DD method is also the product of an approach that sees agroforestry as 'system specific' rather than 'location specific.'

The RCA of the BFD employs various methods to plan social forestry programs but stresses a standardized social survey. In fact RCA appears to be closer to 'rapid surveying' than RRA. RCA employs mainly conventional surveys techniques applied by trained interviewers to random samples of respondents, supplemented by key informant interviews. Questions and survey instruments are detailed in advance and RCA reports stress quantification. The advantages of RCA are that it is relatively rapid and it is taking place within an agency that needs to come to terms with poor rural people as major clients.

The Khon Kaen University fuelwood situation RRA (Sukaesinee Subhadhira et al., 1985) was employed to assess how rural people adjust progressively to increasing problems of fuelwood scarcity. The RRA was rapid, lasting only 4 days, and employed two complementary teams to appraise the acquisition and use of fuelwood in areas of abundance, beginning scarcity, acute scarcity and recovery from scarcity. The RRA uses triangulation to stratify respondents and to appraise their situations and developed a simple gadget for measuring fuelwood. The RRA highlights the social and cultural complexity of the problem of fuelwood scarcity, in addition to the biophysical and energetic. An important result of the fuelwood RRA is a clear direction for interdisciplinary sensitivity and imagination in planning programs to alleviate shortages. Institutional and

organizational arrangements, which are often neglected in project design and implementation, and clearly of great importance.

Special Applications of RRA. Elizabeth Croll (1984) describes the particular value of RRA to field research on rural women in China where the technique was especially appropriate because access by foreigners to the field is often limited to no more than a month. To cope with this problem Croll combined good background preparation to identify key questions in advance with a tightly structured questionnaire administered in the field, supplemented by observation of particular indicators appropriate to her studies. The research presents a good example of complementarity between desk research, conventional surveys, and informal observation in rapid appraisal. Because of strong prevailing ideologies Croll's research suggests that useful information about certain issues in China cannot be gained through rapid methods: certain questions will always elicit the same answer. However, rapid appraisal is generally assisted by the high level of organization in China and by the small range of opportunities for differentials between households. In contrast to many other RRAs, Croll's research suggests the need to know specific household contexts in advance, rather than to discover them through RRA.

The most complete illustration of conceptual tools for RRA is provided by Limpinuntana (1985) who examines the use of checklists, secondary information, preexisting maps, on the spot maps, agricultural calendars, labor schedules, logic and decision trees, local terms and folk taxonomy. Systematic use of questions on "who, when, what, where, why, and how" is explained for interdisciplinary teams conducting semi-structured interviews, supplemented by direct observation. The tools described have been developed mainly in agricultural RRA but are potentially useful to a vast range of applications (health, nutrition, social forestry, fisheries, infrastructure and land use planning) where questions must be developed on-the-spot and when resources are limited. With the aid of these conceptual tools, which can be learned in advance of fieldwork, RRA practitioners can become more effective interviewers, asking better questions more cost-effectively with respect to time. When knowledge of these tools is combined with agreed protocols on field conduct by the RRA team, semi-structured interviews can be more reliably tailored to the purpose and context of the RRA. The value of graphic tools to synthesize agroecological features, seasonal calendars, production and marketing systems, household decision making, and insitutional arrangements is described concisely by Conway (1985) in an application in Northern Pakistan.

Carson (1985) also illustrates the value of large-scale aerial photographs (1:5000) as starting points for RRA since they permit land and human resources to be considered concurrently, are relatively inexpensive, and can be interpreted accurately by rural people without formal training. Aerial photographs provide a single base for incorporating social and economic factors on a natural landscape quickly and at low cost. Experience gained in this way may improve also the reliability of interpretation of satellite images applicable to much larger geographic areas. Carson identifies how large-scale aerial photographs have contributed to planning forestry projects in

Nepal, specifically in siting nurseries and experimental plantings and establishing village-level land management plans.

Stocking and Abel (1980) indicate how proxy variables and small sample methods can be employed to appraise aspects of the physical environment which are normally assessed by longer methods, or not assessed at all. Three case studies related to soils, plant indicators, and erosion are presented. In each case, proxy variables that are obvious features of the landscape and understood by local farmers are shown to provide information on another parameter or set of parameters. The resulting information is coarse but useful if supplemented by sufficient expert knowledge and if the nature and extent of the loss in accuracy associated with the rapid methods is made explicit.

Problems Facing RRA

Based on experience in application, some potential problems facing RRA have already been identified by Beebe (1985), Harrington (1980) and others. These problems range from methodological and conceptual issues to questions of institutionalization and influence over decision making. These, and a number of additional problems based on a review of RRA literature, include the following major concerns:

- * Acceptance of RRA challenges conventional views of information gathering. Most current development institutions are supported by the epistemological beliefs that support objective knowledge, and traditional knowledge is discounted. We perceive the world through our Weltanschauung or world view, an interpretation that allows us to make sense of observation. Information that does not correspond closely with the world view of decision-makers is unlikely to have much influence (Jamieson, 1985). Acceptance of RRA and its findings will be dependent on a willingness to accept what is currently an unconventional view of reality. Since Descartes, scientists have tackled hard questions by reducing them to a sequence of small problems but RRA represents a product of systems thinking that treats complexity holistically. Despite lip-service to holism, systems thinking is still the exception rather than the rule and systems approaches pose problems of acceptability of, and confidence in results.

What confidence can we place in the results of RRA? The answer to this question will be found in part in refinement of the concepts and methods of RRA and in part in the success of development activities shaped by RRA producing desired results faster and more dependably than when RRA is not employed. RRA includes a range of practical, hands-on procedures and their worth is measured best by practical results in the form of redesigned research and aid agendas or benefits delivered to target beneficiaries.

* Every virtue of RRA also represents a potential pitfall. For example:-

- Key informants may be very useful or reinforce biases
- proxies may be valid or misleading
- inexpensive techniques may be applied indiscriminately
- flexible methods may be difficult to replicate
- experienced personnel may be unavailable in the poorest areas.
- speed may lead to superficially
- interdisciplinarity may prohibit consensus
- insights gained in the field may be overly influential.

This list could go on. Each aspect of RRA that makes it appealing reflects an important methodological question that must be addressed squarely if RRA is to gain acceptance and avoid the pitfalls of fashion. However, paying attention to these important details will take a level and type of effort that is different from that required to perform RRA. Terms and procedures in RRA ('optimal ignorance', 'reasonable cost', 'semi-structured interview') need to be progressively better understood and practitioners must be prepared to invest a significant portion of their time and energy to establishing the core of RRA.

* Success in RRA depends on its institutionalization within development organizations. A major challenge to RRA is to involve local decision makers intimately in RRA in order that the field experience and subsequent action are potentially closely related. The experience of FSAR may be helpful here. FSAR has been heavily funded by aid donors, performed by expatriate staff, and 'added' on as a unit to existing research and extension systems (Biggs and Gibbon, 1984). The results have often proved disappointing because farmers and local people in the research and extension system have not provided the main organizational vehicle for FSAR. In addition, FSAR has been introduced through projects with a predetermined life and discreet funding.

Nevertheless, FSAR has been influential in reorienting agricultural research systems to recognize their farmer clients, to take a more holistic view of the agroeconomic environment of the farm family as a producer and consumer, and to build up local research capabilities through an evolutionary, learning approach. Where this has been achieved, FSAR has evolved within a particular institutional and political context, not in spite of it.

* RRA must avoid the pitfalls of fashion. In the well-intentioned search for progress in development, certain concepts and practices attract the attention of the development community and become elevated to 'star' status. FSAR is experiencing this. The danger is that unrealistic expectations become associated with indiscriminate growth, and a good idea is killed with 'kindness'. How is an innovative

concept nurtured, tested and evaluated and permitted to mature through trial and error, modification and retrieval? RRA has all the hallmarks of stardom, including the brief life. How can this be avoided?

RRA must remain an experience-based, hands-on practice. RRA teams must constantly remind themselves that RRA is not an end in itself but a means. RRA should be encouraged to evolve within the institutions which are to become better informed by the practice. Practitioners should resist pressures to standardize RRA methods and allow the current diversity of RRA to flourish. Nevertheless, RRA should not be applied indiscriminately and every RRA exercise should be critically evaluated by the team at its termination. RRA must continue to evolve as a process not a package.

Know when to use RRA and when not to use it. As a learning process that links researchers and development administrations more closely to their 'clients', RRA can be an energizing experience, providing new insights and motivation. However, we need to ask more pointedly when should RRA be used, by itself or in combination with other information-gathering methods? For example, when time is short, don't attempt to do research on some issues, such as land tenure, is one possible rule (Streefland and Streefkerk, 1982). However, Galt (1985) and others have shown that for certain activities in FSR, RRA is quite adequate for informing research design.

Thomas and Suphanchaimat (1985) describe how RRA can be a useful complement to both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. In either case, formal questionnaires administered by outsiders may show cultural and contextual biases. RRA methods can be added to more conventional research during the design stages to increase awareness of the context of the target group and the flexibility of the research instruments. RRA's can help interviewers explain themselves to interviewees at the outset of the process, to ask better questions, and to improve the quality of conclusions.

Where representativeness is an important issue, RRA may be an inadequate substitute for data based on random sampling. Randomization methods also seem to be valuable for appraising physical traits, and aerial photographs, sketch maps and transects are useful tools for aiding random selection. Purposive sampling seems to be more effective for capturing social and cultural traits. And where quantification is important, as in the analysis of experimental results, an informal method by itself may be inadequate. People who have practiced RRA need to evaluate their experience critically vis-a-vis alternative approaches to informing action. When is precision needed, and when is it not necessary?

Survey research has dominated socioeconomic investigation in developing countries despite criticism that survey results are insensitive to context (Stone and Campbell, 1984). More

intensive, qualitative fieldwork methods are required which can provide guidelines for survey designs, means of checking non-sampling errors, and guide the choice of survey methods.

How well do proxies and indicators reflect the phenomena they substitute for? Because of the importance of proxies and indicators in RRA there is an urgent need for more testing of their ability to capture economically the essence of the phenomena under investigation. An indicator captures only one dimension of a phenomenon under study, and observation of that dimension can vary with the context. For that reason a particular indicator can lose its meaning in different times and places. RRA needs to be able to explain why particular indicators are useful and not misleading by stating the assumptions that tie the indicator to the phenomenon.

Conclusion

RRA has been forced on rural development professionals by scarcities of resources and the demands of practitioners for progress. However, RRA appears to be capable of generating information that is not only timely and economical but qualitatively distinctive. In the words of Carruthers and Chambers (1981) short-cut methods do not have to be second rate and unprofessional. Indeed, the experience of the last five years suggests the RRA has contributed to a new professionalism in rural development that puts the small-scale farmer and poor rural people in developing countries first. RRA's are not only cost-effective in terms of personnel, time and money but powerful tools for directing and motivating rural development professionals.

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