

Performance Monitoring and Evaluation

TIPS

USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation

USING RAPID APPRAISAL METHODS

USAID's reengineering guidance encourages the use of rapid, low-cost methods for collecting information on the performance of development assistance activities.

What are these methods? What are their strengths and weaknesses? When are they appropriate? This Tips addresses these questions.

What Are Rapid Appraisal Methods?

Rapid appraisal methods are quick, low-cost ways to gather data systematically in support of managers' information needs, especially questions about performance.

Rapid appraisal methods fall on a continuum between very informal methods, such as casual conversations or short site visits, and highly formal methods, such as censuses, surveys, or experiments.

Informal methods are cheap, "quick and dirty," and susceptible to bias. They follow no established procedures, but rely on common sense and experience. They do not generate systematic, verifiable information, and thus may not be credible with decision-makers.

Conversely, formal methods are highly structured, following precise, established procedures that limit errors and biases. They generate quantitative data that are relatively accurate, enabling conclusions to be made with confidence. Because they have high reliability and validity, they generally have high credibility with decision-makers. Weaknesses include their expense and requirements for highly technical skills.

Between these two lie rapid appraisal methods. They are neither very informal nor fully formal. They share some of the properties of both and that is their strength as well as their weakness.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of rapid appraisal methods include the following:

They are relatively low-cost. Rapid appraisal studies are usually only a fraction of the \$100,000 to \$200,000 often spent for a sample survey. They typically have a smaller sample size and narrower focus, and they often require less technical and statistical expertise than formal methods.

They can be quickly completed. Rapid appraisal methods can gather, analyze, and report relevant information to decision-makers within days or weeks. This is not possible with sample surveys. Rapid appraisal methods are advantageous to decision-makers who seldom have the option of holding up important decisions to wait for information.

They are good at providing in-depth understanding of complex socioeconomic systems or processes. Formal methods, which focus on quantifiable information, lose much in "operationalizing" social and economic phenomena.

They provide flexibility. Rapid appraisal methods allow evaluators to explore relevant new ideas and issues that may not have been anticipated in planning the study. Such changes are not possible in sample surveys once the questionnaire is designed and the survey is under way.

Rapid appraisal's limitations:

They have limited reliability and validity. Information generated may lack reliability and validity because of informal sampling techniques, individual biases of the evaluators or interviewers, and difficulties in recording, coding, and analyzing qualitative data. Those using rapid appraisal methods can minimize these problems, for example, by taking steps to reduce bias during data collection and analysis, or by using more than one method to cross-check results (triangulation).

They lack quantitative data from which generalizations can be made for a whole population. Most rapid appraisal methods generate qualitative information. Even those that generate quantitative data (such as minisurveys and direct observation) cannot be generalized with precision, because they are almost always based on non-representative samples. While a rapid appraisal method can give a picture of the prevalence of a situation, behavior, or attitude, it cannot tell the extent or pervasiveness. For example, it may show that many farmers are not using credit facilities, but not the percentage of farmers.

Their credibility with decision-makers may be low. Most decision-makers are more impressed with precise figures than qualitative descriptive statements. For example, a sample survey finding that 83 percent of local entrepreneurs were satisfied with technical assistance provided is likely to carry more weight than the conclusion, based on key informant interviews, that most entrepreneurs interviewed seemed satisfied with the technical assistance.

When Are Rapid Appraisal Methods Appropriate?

Choosing between informal, rapid appraisal, and formal methods of data collection should depend on balancing several potentially conflicting factors:

- purpose of the study (importance and nature of the decision hinging on it)
- level of confidence in results needed (accuracy, reliability, validity)
- time frame within which it is needed (when decision must be made)
- resource constraints (budget, expertise)
- nature of information required

Regarding the last factor—nature of the information required—rapid appraisal methods are especially useful and appropriate:

When qualitative, descriptive information is sufficient for decision-making. When there is no great need for precise or representative quantitative data, rapid appraisal is a good choice. When there is a need to understand complex cultural, social, or economic systems and processes, qualitative information from rapid appraisal methods have an advantage over formal methods—for example, when assessing organizations and institutions, socioeconomic conditions of an area (communities, for example), or the cultural patterns, behaviors, values, and beliefs of a group or population.

When an understanding is required of the motivations and attitudes that may affect behavior, for instance of a development activity's customers, partners, or stakeholders. Rapid appraisal methods are successful in answering the "why" and "how" questions. For example, key informant interviews or focus group discussions are more likely than sample surveys to provide insightful answers to such questions as, "Why are farmers not adopting the recommended variety of seeds?" or "How are macroeconomic policies being implemented?"

When available quantitative data must be interpreted. Routinely generated quantitative data from activity records and performance monitoring—data about financial outlays, input and output volumes, products and services provided to customers, customer usage, results targets accomplished or missed—may require explanation. Many of the rapid appraisal methods are useful in interpreting such data, resolving inconsistencies, and deriving meaningful conclusions. Suppose, for instance, performance monitoring data show female farmers aren't using a technical package recommended by an agricultural development activity. Interviews with key informants and one or two focus groups can shed light on this.

When the primary purpose is to generate suggestions and recommendations. Often an evaluation is used to solve a problem facing an activity. What is needed are practical recommendations. For example, the manager of a contraceptive social marketing activity may be concerned with finding ways to augment sales. The manager's needs can be served by eliciting suggestions in interviews

or focus groups with doctors, pharmacists, medical workers, traders, and customers.

When the need is to develop questions, hypotheses, and propositions for more elaborate, comprehensive formal studies. Key informant and group interviews are widely used for this purpose.

Common Rapid Appraisal Methods

The most commonly used methods include:

Key informant interviews. Involves interviews with 15 to 35 individuals selected for their knowledge and to reflect diverse views. Interviews are qualitative, in-depth and semistructured. Interview guides listing topics are used, but questions are framed during the interviews, using subtle probing techniques.

Focus groups. Several homogeneous groups of 8 to 12 participants each discuss issues and experiences among themselves. A moderator introduces the topic, stimulates and focuses the discussion, and prevents domination of discussion by a few.

Community interviews. These take place at public meetings open to all community members. Interaction is between the participants and the interviewer, who presides over the meeting and asks questions following a carefully prepared interview guide.

Direct observation. Teams of observers record what they see and hear at a program site, using a detailed observation form. Observation may be of physical surroundings or of ongoing activities, processes or discussions.

Minisurveys. Involves interviews with 25 to 50 individuals, usually selected using nonprobability sampling techniques. Structured questionnaires are used that focus on a limited number of closed-ended questions. Generates quantitative data that can often be collected and analyzed quickly.

Each of these methods has particular situations in which they are most appropriate or useful, as well as distinct advantages and limitations. The matrix on page 4 summarizes this. For information on individual methods, see additional *Tips*, or selected further readings below.

Selected Further Reading

Kumar, Krishna, *Rapid, Low Cost Data Collection Methods for A.I.D.*, A.I.D. Program Design and Evaluation Methodology Report No. 10. 1987 (PN-AAL-100)

Kumar, Krishna (editor), *Rapid Appraisal Methods*, World Bank Regional and Sectoral Studies, 1993.

Kumar, Krishna, *Conducting Key Informant Interviews in Developing Countries*, A.I.D. Program Design and Evaluation Methodology Report No.13, 1986 (PN-AAX-226)

Kumar, Krishna, *Conducting Group Interviews in Developing Countries*, A.I.D. Program Design and Evaluation Methodology Report No.8, 1987 (PN-AAL-088)

Kumar, Krishna, *Conducting Mini Surveys in Developing Countries*, A.I.D. Program Design and Evaluation Methodology Report No. 15, 1990 (PN-AAX-249)

Rapid Appraisal and Beyond, The Participation Forum Workshop Notes, 1995.

CDIE's *Tips* series provide advice and suggestions to USAID managers on how to plan and conduct performance monitoring and evaluation. They are supplemental references to the reengineering automated directives system (ADS), chapter 203. For further information, contact Annette Binnendijk, CDIE Senior Evaluation Advisor, phone (703) 875-4235, fax (703) 875-4866, or e-mail. *Tips* can be ordered from the Development Information Services Clearinghouse, phone (703) 351-4006 or fax (703) 351-4039. Please refer to the PN number. To order via Internet, address requests to docorder@disc.mhs.compuserve.com

COMMON RAPID APPRAISAL METHODS

METHODS	Useful for Providing	Advantages	Limitations
KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --general, descriptive data --understanding of attitudes and behaviors --suggestions and recommendations --information to interpret quantitative data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --provides in-depth, inside information --flexibility permits exploring unanticipated topics --easy to administer --relatively inexpensive --takes 4-6 weeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --does not generate quantitative data --susceptible to interviewer and selection biases
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --customer views on services, products, benefits --information on implementation problems --suggestions and recommendations for improving activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --can be completed rapidly (5 weeks) --very economical --group discussion may reduce inhibitions, allowing free exchange of ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --does not provide quantitative data --discussion may be dominated by a few individuals --susceptible to moderator biases
COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --village/community level data --views on activities and suggestions for improvements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --permits direct interactions between evaluator and large numbers of individuals --can generate some quantitative data on community characteristics, behaviors, opinions --participants tend to correct each other, providing more accurate information --inexpensive and quick (5-6 weeks) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --can be manipulated by elites or monopolized by individuals --cultural taboos or norms may inhibit discussion of certain topics
DIRECT OBSERVATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --data on physical infrastructure, supplies, conditions --information about an agency's delivery systems, services --insights into behaviors or events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --phenomenon can be examined in its natural setting --may reveal conditions or problems informants are unaware of --can be completed in 3-4 weeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --susceptible to observer bias --act of observing can affect behaviors --distortions can occur if sites selected are not representative
MINISURVEYS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --quantitative data on narrowly focused questions for a relatively homogeneous population --when probability sampling is difficult --data on attitudes, beliefs, behaviors of customers or partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --can generate quantitative data --reduces non-random sampling errors --requires limited personnel and is quick (5-6 weeks) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --findings are less generalizable than those from sample surveys --susceptible to sampling biases --requires statistical analysis skills --inappropriate for gathering in-depth, qualitative information