Comparing Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) methods in rural research

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Abstract: RRA is a social science approach that emerged in the late 1970s. The basic idea of RRA is to rather quickly collect, analyse and evaluate information on rural conditions and local knowledge. This information is generated in close co-operation with the local population in rural areas. Therefore, the research methods had to be adjusted to local conditions, i.e. they had to meet the communication needs of illiterate people or people who are not used to communicating in scientific terms. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) as a method falls under the qualitative and participatory group of research methods. PRA evolved from Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA). In recognition of the fact that the community to which development projects are supposed to serve is not involved in the process and the subsequent flaws implicit in designing and implementing such projects, development practitioners and thinkers started to investigate ways for effective community participation in the overall process. This led to a series of information collection techniques used to collect and analyze data in rural areas, nown as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), which was developed in the 1970s and 1980s.
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Introduction:

Robert Chambers (2004) describes PRA as "a growing family of approaches, methods, attitudes and behaviours to enable and empower people to share, analyze and enhance their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor, evaluate and reflect". While RRA focuses on data collection or extraction, PRA focuses on empowerment. It needs to be noted that although RRA and PRA carry the term 'rural', they can both be and have been applied in urban settings. To make it more inclusive and to emphasize the empowerment aspect, the term Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) is used interchangeably with PRA.

PRA has many sources. The most direct is rapid rural appraisal (RRA) from which it has evolved. RRA itself began as a response in the late 1970s and early 1980s to the biased perceptions derived from rural development tourism (the brief rural visit by the urban-based professional) and the many defects and high costs of large-scale questionnaire surveys. PRA has much in common with RRA but differs basically in the ownership of information, and the nature of the process: in RRA information is more elicited and extracted by outsiders as part of a process of data gathering; in PRA it is more generated, analyzed, owned and shared by local people as part of a process of their empowerment. The term Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is being used to describe a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act(Bhat and satish, 1993).

PRA flows from and owes much to the traditions and methods of participatory research , applied anthropology, and field research on farming systems and has evolved most directly from a synthesis of agroecosystem analysis and rapid rural appraisal (RRA).

RRA - Rapid Rural Appraisal

RRA is a social science approach that emerged in the late 1970s. The basic idea of RRA is to rather quickly collect, analyse and evaluate information on rural conditions and local knowledge. This information is generated in close co-operation with the local population in rural areas. Therefore, the research methods had to be adjusted to local conditions, i.e. they had to meet the communication needs of illiterate people or people who are not used to communicating in scientific terms (Blackburn and holand, 1999).

Tools like mapping, diagramming and ranking were developed or improved in order to gather information for decision-makers in development agencies. One of the key principles of RRA is the visualisation of questions and results by using locally comprehensible symbols. A main reason for developing RRA was to find shortcuts in the search for relevant information on rural development issues in order to avoid costly and time consuming research procedures (Cernea, 1999).

In most of the cases RRA is carried out by a small team of researchers or trained professional in one to three days in a kind of workshop. The role of the local population in RRA is to provide relevant local knowledge for research purposes and development planning. The RRA team manages the process and maintains the power to decide on how to utilise this information(Chambers, 1997).

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(Scoones and Thompson, 1994):

- 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.

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(Cornwall, 2008).

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(Chaudhari, 1995).

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(Mancarenhas, 1991).

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(Gary, 1992).

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(Guijt and shah, 1998).

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(Mikkelsen, 1995).

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA):

PRA are good for:

• Providing basic information in situations where little in known
• Identifying and assessing problems
• Appraising, designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluation programs and projects
• Getting a better picture of needs and organizations' ability to meet them
• Developing and transferring appropriate technologies
• Appraising emergencies
• Planning projects that are more relevant, restructuring administrations, assisting in decision-making and policy formation
• Generating hypotheses, ruling out inappropriate ones
• Providing guidelines for survey designs and assessing the applicability of their results to other places.
• Fleshing – out complementing, interpreting, or giving depth and context to information obtained through other methods(Chambers, 1998).

PRA is not very useful for:

Working in situations in which the problem is not usefully addressed at the local or group level, for example, in situations where large-scale structural reorganization is necessary (but even then, local views may help to shape the change).

PRA TECHNIQUES

There are six popular techniques/methods that are used to facilitate PRA exercise that enables the community to develop and compile a detailed profile of themselves and their situation(Daane, 1997).

• **Venn Diagram**

Venn Diagrams are drawn to help understand the current formal and informal institutions in the area under study and the nature of relationship between the communities and these existing institutions and structures. The community is led to identify their needs, analyze these needs and assess the **cause and effect** relationship. This process provides an opportunity for the community to arrive at the most pressing or priority need utilizing a logical format and this often culminates into a problems tree(Rajaratnam, 1993).

• **Time line**

This technique describes chronologies of events, listing major remembered events in a village with approximate dates. The process involves elderly people in a village to narrate their life history, summarizing major events and changes that have taken place over a period of time. Major events and political regimes including their significance and influence to the change in the lives of the community over time are recorded. Time line shows a broad movement of different aspects in a village during the community's lifetime (IUCN, 2001).

• **Time trend**

This is a technique where people given an opportunity to account about their past and discuss how things close to them have changed. Issues such as ecological history, changes in land-use, cropping patterns, changes in customs, practices & trends in population, migration, education, health, prices, yields, etc. This technique is more precise in giving indication of change (increase or decrease) about a particular item/activity.

• **Mapping**

This is where people use ground, floor or flip charts to map and draw the different aspects of their village e.g. social issues, demographic, resources, health, wealth, literacy, livestock,

economic activities, water resources, trees, housing layout etc. This technique portrays the image dwellings in a village.

• **Transect Walk**

This is a systematical walk with the Community members through the village observing, discussing, identifying different forms, local techniques, introduced technologies, seeking their uses, problems, solutions and opportunities. It is done to ensure that the team fully explores the spatial differences in the community, assessing the infrastructure that exists and any possible activities that might be taking place within the village.

• **Matrix**

Matrix is a ranking & scoring technique that is used to discover local attitudes and perceptions about a particular resource. This may be about the land use, water conservation measures, seasons, weather conditions, rainfall pattern or rainfall distribution, intensity and efficiency. These are assessed to determine the extent they affect and influence the way of life within the community. This helps to provide a better understanding of constraints and opportunities for possible development interventions. A graph is usually drawn in a matrix format displaying these constraints and opportunities.

The objectives of the PRA are:

• to enable rural people to organize their knowledge, share experience among
themselves and gather information on resources they have
• to understand the rural environments and social as well as economic
dynamism
• to understand the trends in the rural socio economic conditions
• to enable the community identify their problems, causes of these problems and
possible solutions
• to enable the community develop a community action plan to address their
problems

In order to limit the PRA to the objectives set and to have consistency in conducting the PRA in the different villages, a PRA manual was prepared by the socio economic team. In line with the manual, emphasis was accorded to the following topics:

1) Village History. The first day of the PRA discussion begins with history of the village which enabled participants to easily and comfortably tell about the history of their village.

2) Agriculture and Livestock. Focus group discussions were made on agriculture and livestock rearing practices including the problems encountered and possible solutions.

3) Social service. The provision of social services like education and health including the associated problems were also discussed in focus group discussions.

4) Village institutions. Institutions, both from within the village and outside, as well as formal and informal with which the rural communities interact have been addressed.

5) Trend lines. Trends in food availability, forest, population growth, wealth, rainfall and poverty are addressed in this section.

6) Wealth ranking, problem analysis, and community action plan. Finally, the participants ranked the community on the basis of its wealth, discussed the major problems and formulated action plan. The PRA is to be followed with a more quantitative and structured socioeconomic survey, which will then be followed by specialized researches in specifically selected areas; notably, poverty and coping mechanisms, microfinance, marketing, utilization and management of natural resources, and gender.

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. 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.

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.

Conclusion:

It is imperative that development activities/initiatives should not be attempted until participatory rural appraisal (PRA) or participatory action research (PAR) has been carried out and that the socio – economic and other factors affecting communities are well understood by the people confronted with the problem.

Kamla Bhasin (1999) suggests that development practitioners should constantly ask themselves: “am I increasing the confidence of the poor, their faith in themselves, and their self – reliance, or am I making them instruments of my own plans of action, imposing my own ideas on them and that of my organization and/or institution?” Social Development is a process of gradual change in which people increase their awareness of their own capabilities and common interests, and use this knowledge to analyse their needs; decide on solutions; organize themselves for cooperative efforts; and mobilize their own human, financial and natural resources to improve, establish and maintain their own social services and institutions within the context of their own culture and their own political system. To give effect to this understanding of social development, participation of communities in their own development is important. The participatory approaches, including PRA provides first step/stage in sustainable community development.

As a result of the PRAs, the communities are expected to attain many benefits including:

• Expressing their own ideas and concerns;
• Organizing their knowledge about the past and present;
• Identifying as a community their problems, the causes of these problems and possible solutions;
• Developing a common plan to address these problems;
• Developing the ability to use their own resources more effectively and attract more resources from the outside.

The academicians/researchers involved in the PRAs are expected to get the following benefits:

• Developing better understanding of rural environments and social as well as economic dynamism taking place there;
• Appreciating the fact that communities are capable of analyzing their problems and outlining possible solutions to their problems;
• Participating in designing possible solutions to community problems;
• Utilizing the results of the PRA work as a research output for publications and presentations;
• Building their research and problem investigation capabilities;
• Supporting their classroom discussions to students with practical examples from the PRA findings.

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