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# Re-tooling in Applied Social Investigation for Development Planning

## Some Methodological Issues

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# Re-tooling in Applied Social Investigation for Development Planning

## Some Methodological Issues

This paper opened the RAP conference, providing an overview of the major issues for which the conference was convened. Methods and techniques are multiplying, as are their application to a broadening range of issues. The author groups Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) with Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) providing a scenario in which the former is viewed as an outgrowth of the latter. As the conference progressed, the more popular view was that the two groups of qualitative methodologies, in fact, had independent origins often based on different programme problems and needs. Regardless, RAP/RRA is viewed here as a new force changing the development planning process and development activities at community level. As a RAP practitioner, the author bolsters his points with examples from his own experience and from colleagues' to show both the power and risks of RAP. This paper also cautions that these approaches, while providing both useful information and a significant change to development perspectives and activities, require great care in terms of professionalism, training, and quality of use. —Eds.

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# 1 Re-tooling in Applied Social Investigation for Development Planning: *Some Methodological Issues*

By Michael M. Cernea

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THE EXPLOSIVE GROWTH and diversification of rapid assessment procedures (RAP) over the last eight to 10 years has opened up new avenues for social investigation in the service of development work. If we try to take stock and synthesize what has happened in the 1980s in RAPs<sup>1</sup>, we can distinguish at least four main processes and trends:

First, *fast repertoire enrichment*: new and imaginative procedures are invented and added to an already respectable inventory;

Second, *application of RAP in new sectors and subsectors through content-adaptation and cross-fertilization*. What initially was to serve syncretically all of "rural development" and was called "rapid rural appraisal" (work by IDS, especially Chambers), has lately been paralleled and reinforced by specialized systems of procedures designed for other sectors. Such other sectors are the primary health care and nutrition sectors (work by Scrimshaw and Hurtado), the social forestry sector (Molnar and others); irrigation projects (Chambers and others); micro-ecosystem assessment (e.g., work on rapid mapping by IIED), etc., I am sure that additional sectors will follow, or perhaps could already be listed. Cross-fertilization of experiences from different sectors gives birth to new procedures.

Third, *geographic broadening* in both the *elaboration* and *application* of RAPs. Work that started at Sussex in England, has been carried forward by the creativeness and organizational efforts of the Khon Kaen school in Thailand, has travelled on the wings of the UN University to Latin America and other places, was tried and enriched in Kenya by IIED and local researchers, and is right now gaining great momentum in India. Of course, these are not simply geographic expansions. They also are tests of cross-cultural adequacy, resulting in broader validation, refinement of methods and increased diversity.

Fourth, last but not least, there is a growing *shift from technique to substance*. When practiced correctly and creatively, these rapid techniques often develop the capacity to carry their practitioners further, to a new *substantive* direction: participatory data generation techniques increase the opportunities for participatory programmes; micro-ecosystem and natural resources assessment, done best by outsiders jointly with the users themselves, bring home *sustainability* goals and motivate *action* for better resource conservation; indigenous knowledge harvested thanks to RAPs gives unanticipated directions to programmes in agriculture or health care.

Reversing a known dictum, perhaps we could say that if rapid social assessment procedures are a medium, then, in this case, the *medium changes the message*. Quite often, the message is not only new information, but *action* itself. Incremental gains in awareness and knowledge, through participatory information gathering and direct rapport, are stimulating activities not envisaged otherwise.

The international conference on RAP in health related programmes is a testimony to the major trends in this field, as well as a working laboratory for exchanging experiences and reflecting on methodology. We need to take stock as we progress. At the conference there is an opportunity to analyze critically our new tools, their strength and weaknesses, with warm hearts and cool heads. There are serious technical, epistemological, and ethical *questions* that demand answers if the RAP field is to continue its growth and fully realize its potential impact. The conference is designed to explore such questions. While the specific emphasis of the conference is on health projects, the methodological problems underlining this domain are largely common to all sectors in which such procedures are used. Papers by Susan Scrimshaw and Duncan Pedersen focus on the specifics of *health* assessment procedures. Therefore, only several selected issues of rather general methodological relevance are introduced here.

### Twin changes: *In planning of projects and in social research*

The first change that I want to point out is that a decade of work on RAP has yielded not only piecemeal data findings, but something more important: a compelling demonstration of RAP's potential for changing and improving the *planning of development*. By cost-effectively providing knowledge about the actors of development themselves, RAPs can increase planners' ability to *put people first* in development projects. And putting people first means often a reversal in many development projects.

The second change, perhaps not less significant: a decade of RAP work has launched some *social sciences on a path of methodological re-tooling*.

To elaborate on these twin significant changes, it is useful to remind ourselves how the interest in rapid rural appraisal evolved. This interest was spawned, in fact, by a crisis-sized shortage of adequate social knowledge in development interventions. The expansion of development aid in the 1960s and 1970s multiplied programmes often conceived without considering people, and far distant from the places where these programmes were to be implemented. Social information tended to be incomplete, unreliable, superficial, subjective, wrong — thus misdirecting such projects in many ways. Time and again, project ill-match after project ill-match, failure after project failure, were traceable to the dearth of good information on the local society (even though this was not the *only* cause of failure).

I know firsthand about this acute need for social knowledge on project areas and populations because I work at the World Bank as a sociologist — and I still have to address the shortage and need for social investigation day in and day out (Cernea 1990). Yet, just prescribing more conventional social science research was largely inoperative, since practical project activities could hardly wait for research designed to last several years.

This was the gap into which the proponents of shortcut, rapid rural appraisal procedures stepped. Most of these proponents were social scientists with applied development orientation. They realized that business as usual in social investigation could not live up to the day's challenges. They wanted also to avoid the double impasse of either "quick and dirty" or "long and late" research.

Today, a decade or so later, the results of searching for shortcuts to knowledge are tangible. A broad arsenal of new techniques for data generation on the life, behaviour and production patterns of individuals, households and communities has been invented, tested, refined, and disseminated. Their summary listing would include: novel forms of direct observation and participant observation; researcher's participation in the studied activity; semi-structured interviews; group interviews; focus groups; mapping; aerial photographs; group walks; diagramming; quantifications; ranking; group reading of satellite imagery; simulation games and role playing;

sondeo techniques and small team investigations; imaginative selection of key information as in chain-interviews; procedures for eliciting the subject's assessments; self-definition; etc. The list is far from exhaustive, yet it testifies to the creativity, intellectual excitement, and diversity that characterize the work in this area.

The effects of the creative search for new approaches on development work are manifold. Not only was additional knowledge generated for many development interventions, but the fallacious argument that a development intervention must proceed even without adequate knowledge — because, allegedly, “it couldn't obtain it anyway” — was voided. Rapid assessment procedures — certainly not alone — are apt to produce knowledge within reasonable time-spans and at costs lower than conventional procedures.

It is significant to note that some major development agencies — among them, the World Bank, USAID, ODA, etc. — have started to use RAP in their work, at least to a certain extent. For the World Bank it has been part and parcel of a broader and longer-term effort to introduce knowledge from non-economic social sciences in designing project strategies, and to promote the use of sociological/anthropological investigation methods for generating the social information needed in preparing, supervising and evaluating projects (Cernea and Tepping 1977, Cernea 1985, 1989, Casley and Kumar 1988, Murphy 1988, Salmen 1989). The problem is often to correct, improve and enhance the spontaneous practices of development agency staff used in “quick and dirty” field assessments, with trained skills in using correctly tested RAPs.

For the social sciences — I refer primarily to sociology, cultural, medical, or economic anthropology, and their applied domains — the sets of rapid assessment procedures represent a consequential *re-tooling process*, a re-tooling process which does not reject or abandon their traditional methods and techniques, but complements and enriches them. RAP represents a new generation of flexible knowledge-producing instruments, which increase the capacity of social sciences for *applied* research. Social sciences are enriched also by the refinements brought to many pre-existing, time honored anthropological or sociological field techniques.

Economists have demonstrated that advances in natural science knowledge reduced the cost of *technical change*. It was also hypothesized that advances in social science knowledge would reduce the costs of social/institutional change (Ruttan 1988). The recent progress in crafting RAPs as new and penetrating tools for understanding social processes is clearly one of the ways to reduce the costs of using social sciences in development projects.

I note also another outcome — which we could call a *multiplier* effect. It goes beyond the *techniques* of social data gathering and consists in the

during the month (or year, etc.), and if so what was the kind and length of each illness?" will depend on the respondent's perception of illness. It was observed (Srinivasan 1989) that in a socioeconomic context where the poor, or women, or some other groups, do not perceive or are culturally conditioned not to admit an illness unless it is sufficiently serious — while the rich tend to be hypochondriacs — one cannot rely on an intergroup comparability of morbidity rate assessments derived from such responses; and there are going to be substantial differences between morbidity estimates through informal interviews and morbidity estimates rated through frequent clinical examination of the same respondents.

To fight off such kinds of limitations in RAPs, we need to address the paramount problem of *professional training* for the practitioners of RAPs. Briefly stated:

- *first*, that the use of RAP requires training, training in *participatory* use of RAPs. The advantages of RAPs can be invalidated if the users mistake RAPs' informal nature for an unbounded permission to "play it by ear."
- *second*, that social scientists — anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, social psychologists, etc. — already trained in their disciplines' basic field methods, have a comparative advantage in using RAP and guarding against methodological distortions.
- *third*, that the methodological re-tooling of applied social research for development projects through RAPs is aiming precisely at broadening the use of social investigation by a larger community of professionals than the trained social scientists. It is crucial that planners, economic analysts and technical specialists who design development projects recognize the potential and accessibility of this broadened social research and absorb it gradually in their tool kit. This, however, is a long term goal, and presupposes changes in many university curricula.

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### The place of RAP within broader research strategies

Before concluding, a few words about the *extrinsic* circumstances that may distort the use and benefits from RAPs in development projects. These circumstances refer to the *place* and *weight* attributed to RAPs in overall strategies for project planning or evaluation.

It is incumbent upon RAP practitioners, I believe, to warn that RAPs are not, and cannot be, a universal cure for all the gaps of social information and that

rapid appraisals are not a substitute for long term basic research methods and procedures. It has to be said explicitly and loudly, that in many cases the design and strategy of development projects cannot be sound without the benefit of long term, non-shortcut, longitudinal, academic, old-fashioned types of social research.

One example: starting from 1975-76, ICRISAT has developed a series of village surveys in India that provide time-series information on up to *ten* years in *three* agroclimatic regions of *India's* semi-arid tropics; it collected longitudinal information approximately every three weeks on all household transactions (consumption, production, investment). This data set may be the only one in existence that allows the measurement of net farm profits over many years and therefore of farm profit risk (H. P. B. Binswanger and M. R. Rosenzweig, personal communication, 1990). Of course, no shortcut procedures are able to or should substitute for *this kind* of study and cannot supply similar knowledge. Any institution or research strategy that would depend on RAP for similar depth or precision on RAP would entertain gravely misplaced expectations.

Social researchers would, in turn, be methodologically ill-advised to resort to RAP when assisting the planning of certain projects or project components which need full sets of data on the *senture* population affected by a project.

Take for instance, project planning for involuntary population displacement from a dam site, and its relocation. I would be more than a little worried if such planning would be expedited through low-cost, informal, shortcut procedures. To be done right, it requires full censuses, house by house inventory of lost assets, determination of joint ownership on specific natural resources, etc. Unfortunately, certain dam planners display unexpected enthusiasm for shortcut procedures in just such cases, preferring imprecision when imprecision is simply not tolerable. The social researchers practicing RAP are obligated to reject the misuse of RAPs in such projects and in research strategies that demand alternative approaches. This does not mean, however, that a combination of procedures cannot be constructed, including RAP as a complementary approach.

Another example, from medical anthropology this time, refers to the study of AIDS. There are recent valuable attempts to put the research on behaviour patterns that may lead to AIDS on the path of RAPs. If epistemological strictures are observed, these attempts may produce useful and urgently needed results. But many things cannot be learned this way. Take for instance, the case of a recent ethnographic synthesis on practices of male circumcision among 409 ethnic groups of African populations, which also analyzed the relationship between circumcision practices and the rates of HIV seroprevalence based on recent statistics. The authors of this study

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(Bongaarts, Reining et al. 1989), rightfully hold that such analyses are beyond the claims of RAP. But complementarity among the two approaches is compatible and desirable.

To conclude, I would emphasize that I see great promise for strengthening the cognitive power and contribution of RAPs and that avoiding the misuse of RAPs is possible too. These are two facets of the same process of methodological re-tooling in applied social research for development.

Towards this re-tooling process in social investigation, this international conference on RAP will make a very valuable contribution.

### Endnote

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