Human Organization, Vol. 54, No. 1, 1995

0018-7259/95/010042-10$1.50/1

Basic Concepts and Techniques of Rapid Appraisal

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Rapid appraisal is an approach for developing a preliminary, qualitative understanding of a situation. This paper identifies three basic concepts—(1) a system perspective, (2) triangulation of data collection, and (3) iterative data collection and analysis—and suggests that they provide a conceptual foundation for rapid appraisal and a rationale for the selection of specific research techniques. The basic concepts and their related research techniques provide a flexible but rigorous approach for data collection and analysis by a team of two or more individuals, usually with different academic discipline backgrounds. The paper reviews the history of rapid appraisal, provides a definition, discusses the three basic concepts and the illustrative research techniques associated with them, argues for flexibility, and suggests the use of a "Data Collection Checklist" to remind the team of important concepts and as a means by which the reader of a report can estimate the degree of confidence that can be placed in the results.

Key words: rapid appraisal, rapid assessment (procedures)

RAPID APPRAISAL allows a team of two or more individuals, usually representing different academic disciplines, to produce qualitative results for decisions about additional research or preliminary decisions for the design and implementation of applied activities. It is especially relevant when time constraints preclude use of intensive qualitative methods by a single researcher and when the different perspectives of the team members (including local participants) are essential for understanding the situation. Rapid appraisal uses the techniques and shares many of the characteristics of traditional, qualitative research, but differs in three important ways: more than one researcher is always involved, researcher team interaction is a critical aspect of the methodology, and the results are produced much faster. Rapid appraisal is characterized by the production of quick results and the simultaneous use of research techniques associated with the three basic concepts: (1) a system perspective, (2) triangulation of data collection, and (3) iterative data collection and analysis. These three concepts provide a flexible but rigorous approach to the collection and analysis of qualitative research data. Individuals with less training and experience with qualitative research methodology have been especially enthusiastic about using the basic concepts for understanding and implementing rapid appraisal.

The three basic concepts provide a conceptual foundation for a wide range of activities that can be labeled "rapid." The phrases "rapid appraisal," "rapid assessment," and "rapid rural appraisal" have been used in discussions on rural development in developing countries since at least the mid-1970s. General use of the phrase "rapid rural appraisal," however, occurred only after it was used as the title of a workshop at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, in October 1978. In addition to being called "rapid appraisal" or "rapid rural appraisal" (RRA) (Chambers 1983), research approaches having at least some of the characteristics identified above have been referred to as "sondeo" (Hildebrand 1982), "informal agricultural survey" (Rhoades 1982), "rapid reconnaissance" (Honadle 1979), "informal methods" (Shaner, Philipp, and Schmehl 1982), "reconnaissance survey" (Shaner, Philipp, and Schmehl 1982), "exploratory survey" (Collinson 1981), "rapid marketing appraisal" (RMA) (Menegay et al. 1990), "market information needs assessment" (MINA) (Guyton 1992), "commodity

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systems assessment methodology" (CSAM) (la Gra 1990), "rapid assessment procedures" (RAP) (Cernea 1990, Scrimshaw and Gleason 1992), "rapid assessment program" (RAP) (Conservation International 1991), and "participatory rural appraisal" (Chambers 1991, CUNES 1989). The terms "rapid assessment procedures" and "participatory rural appraisal" are particularly attractive for identifying this approach, because the first term forms a descriptive acronym, "RAP," and the other term explicitly includes "participation" as part of the title. "Rapid appraisal" has, however, been used in this paper because it is a more general term, is not limited to a specific area or topic, and leaves room for the continued use of numerous other terms to describe related approaches. The use of multiple terms is probably desirable in preventing rapid appraisal from becoming a "buzz word" and in focusing on the need to adapt the methodology to the topic being investigated. Robert Chambers (1991:531) cautions that there is a danger that rapid appraisal "could be over-sold, too rapidly adopted, badly done, and then discredited, to suffer an undeserved, premature burial as has occurred with other innovative research approaches."

Rapid appraisal has been described as: "modified survey" (Hildebrand 1982:289), "survey undertaken without questionnaires" (Shaner, Philipp, and Schmehl 1982:73), "informal," "exploratory," "largely unstructured interviews combined with observation" (Honadle 1979:2), "organized common sense, freed from the chains of inappropriate professionalism" (Chambers 1980:15), a way to "increase the opportunities for participatory programs, done best by outsiders jointly with the users themselves" (Cernea 1990:3), "a middle zone between quick-and-dirty and long-and-dirty, . . . cost-effective . . . fairly-quick and fairly-clean" (Chambers 1991:521), "first-cut assessments of . . . poorly known areas" (Conservation International 1991), and "a form of appropriate technology: cheap, practical and fast" (Bradfield 1981 *in* Rhoades 1982:5).

Rapid appraisal originally received attention as a tool for rural development projects, especially for farming systems projects in developing countries (Beebe 1985; Collinson 1982; Hildebrand 1982; Rhoades 1985; Shaner, Philipp, and Schmehl 1982). During the last decade, rapid appraisal techniques have also been used for agricultural marketing (Holtzman 1993, Menegay et al. 1990), nutrition and primary health-care studies (Scrimshaw and Gleason 1992, Scrimshaw and 1987), social forestry (Monlar 1989), agroecosystem analysis (Conway 1985) and irrigation projects (Chambers 1983, de los Reyes 1984). Important references on rapid appraisal include Agricultural Administration (1981), Khon Kaen University (1987), McCracken, Pretty, and Conway (1988), Hassin-Brack (1988), WRI (1990), Scrimshaw and Gleason (1992), and Kumar (1993). Robert Chambers (1991:523) notes the absence of a comprehensive manual even though several organizations have produced their own guides. Much of the literature on rapid appraisal has focused on the techniques available for implementation under different circumstances. The references identified above (especially Khon Kaen University 1987, Kumar 1993, and Scrimshaw and Gleason 1992) provide numerous specific examples of when, who, and why specific rapid appraisal methodological tools might be used. There has been very little attention given to developing an overall conceptual framework that provides guidance to practitioners on minimum conditions that need to be met, and a rationale for choices and adaptation of techniques depending on the topic being investigated.

A conceptual foundation for rapid appraisal based on basic concepts is one way of providing a framework that identifies the essential elements of a rigorous process while maximizing flexibility in the selection of specific research techniques. What is identified as "basic concepts" in this paper could also be referred to as methodological approaches or orientations. The three basic concepts identified in this paper are based on "principles" identified by a working group at the Khon Kaen University International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal in Thailand, in September 1985.[1] There are other basic concepts associated with rapid appraisal and other ways of articulating them. For example, Robert Chambers (1991:522) identifies five basic principles: (1) optimizing trade-offs, (2) offsetting biases, (3) triangulation, (4) learning directly from and with rural people, and (5) learning rapidly and progressively. The three concepts used in this paper were chosen to provide categories for organizing techniques while identifying specific techniques a team *might* use to generate timely, valid, and cost-effective qualitative results.

Rapid appraisal is defined as follows:

> Rapid appraisal is an approach for quickly developing a preliminary understanding of a situation where specific research techniques are chosen from a wide range of options and where it is assumed that (1) all the relevant parts of a local system cannot be identified in advance, (2) the local system is best understood by combining the expertise of a multidisciplinary team that includes locals, while combining information collected in advance, direct observations and semi-structured interviews, and (3) time should be structured to ensure team interaction as part of an iterative process.

Table 1 illustrates the relationship of the basic concepts and illustrative research techniques associated with them. It should be noted that the listed research techniques are not the only way of achieving the basic concepts, but are techniques that have been found to work together under some field conditions. The Sociotechnical Profile (de los Reyes 1984) used with small scale irrigation systems is a good example of a rapid appraisal methodology that uses different techniques to achieve the basic concepts.

Basic Concept 1. Systems Perspective

Rapid appraisal should be based on what the participants in the system believe to be the critical elements, their relative importance, and how they relate to each other. Rapid appraisal is designed to contribute to an insider's perspective of the system. Even limited attention to systems methodology can provide an expanded set of conceptual tools for understanding how local participants view their system. It should be noted, however, that the same techniques can be, and often are, chosen by social scientists based on their professional training and experience without reference to "systems." Rapid appraisal does not reject or abandon the traditional methods and techniques of the social sciences, but provides for ways to complement and enrich them (Cernea 1990:7).

A system can be defined as a set of mutually-related elements that constitute a whole, having properties as an entity (Checkland and Scholes 1990:4). For the purposes of rapid appraisal, it is useful to expand this definition to include that the elements in the "system" behave in a way that an observer has chosen to

TABLE 1 Relationship of the Basic Concepts and Illustrative Research Techniques

Basic concepts	Illustrative research techniques: Specific techniques are chosen and adapted depending on the situation
Systems perspective	
– Assumption that elements of a system and their relative importance cannot be identified in advance	– Semi-structured interviews – Use of short guidelines – Purposeful selection of respondents – Group interviews – Rejection of the use of survey questionnaire
– Use of local definitions and "emic" categories	
– Consideration of indigenous knowledge	
– Consideration of variability	
Triangulation	
– Multiple perceptions	– Small interdisciplinary teams – Local participation – Combination of interviews, information collected in advance, and direct observation
– Multiple research methods	
Iterative process	
– Use of information collected to change the research process	– Structured research with time for team interaction
– Production of tentative hypotheses and use of findings to refine them	

view as coordinated to accomplish one or more purposes (Wilson and Morren 1990:70). A systems perspective initially considers all aspects of a local situation, but quickly moves towards the definition of a model that focuses on only the most important elements and their relationships to each other. Systems are always complex, and it is not possible to try to deal with all aspects of a system at the same time. The first task of a rapid appraisal team is to make a rough approximation of the system and to identify the elements that are most important for the specific situation being examined. It is very important to note that the elements in a system *cannot* be identified in advance, nor can decisions be made in advance as to which elements of a system are most important for understanding a given situation.

There is a growing body of literature on the use of a systems approach for investigating and addressing complex issues (Checkland and Scholes 1990). Checkland and Scholes (1990:6) have developed a model for "Soft Systems" methodology that is particularly relevant to rapid appraisal. They suggest that a soft systems approach includes several steps: (a) identifying a situation which has provoked concern; (b) selecting some relevant human activity system; (c) making a model of the activity; (d) using the model to question the real-world situation; and (e) using the debate initiated by the comparison to define action which would improve the original problems situation. Research techniques associated with a systems perspective are designed initially to consider all its aspects, including the complexity and interrelationships of its elements, and to move toward the identification of a subset of elements most relevant to the particular situation being investigated. When rapid appraisal is used as part of the design or implementation of applied activities, this subset usually uses those elements necessary to define an action statement and develop a "picture" of the future. Checkland and Scholes also identify several specific techniques for getting a group of individuals to participate in the process of developing an action statement that are relevant to rapid appraisal.

The use of a system perspective precludes the use of some research techniques and demands special attention to several topics. The important elements of a system usually cannot be known before initiating the rapid appraisal, and so methodologies that begin with questions prepared in advance, such as questionnaire survey research, are almost always inappropriate. A systems perspective focuses on the context of the information collected, is able to utilize indigenous knowledge even when it is unanticipated by the rapid appraisal team, and recognizes the importance of variability. Each of these topics is discussed briefly below.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE USE OF QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY RESEARCH AS A BEGINNING POINT FOR UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMS. Questionnaire survey research assumes that enough is known in advance to identify the relevant parts of a system and to prepare questions. Since a questionnaire cannot identify unanticipated, site-specific system relationships, it is limited to validating models articulated in advance. The use of techniques associated with a systems perspective does not guarantee success in identifying important system relationships, but research based on a questionnaire often ensures that important elements of the local system will be missed. The problem with questionnaire survey research, as part of a systems perspective, is that unless the context of the data is understood, answers may be based on categories of reality different from those assumed by the question – resulting in answers that consistently will be elicited each time the question is asked, but providing responses that are invalid. Linda Stone and S. Gabriel Campbell illustrate the need to consider the context in addition to the normal sampling and weighing of units found in most research with an example of a knowledge, attitude, and practice survey in Nepal. In this case, even well designed and carefully implemented questionnaire-based surveys resulted in such inaccuracies as to call into question the analytical and policy conclusions based on the studies (Stone and Campbell 1984:36).

It is sometimes incorrectly argued that survey research is quicker and can be done with less experienced, less qualified researchers than rapid appraisal. Data collection by survey sometimes requires less time, but data analysis almost always takes more time. Data usually must be coded, entered into a computer, and then analyzed in separate steps and at places removed from the research site. Survey enumerators may not have to make many independent decisions, but good survey research cannot be carried out without training and close field supervision. In addition, special training in instrument design and data management ensures that survey research usually does not include local participants as full members on the research team (Chambers 1991:526).

Rapid appraisal is not a substitute for long-term, basic re-

search methods, including research based on questionnaire survey methods (Cernea 1990:17). Questionnaire survey research may be necessary to validate rapid appraisal results. The argument is against using questionnaire surveys as the first step, not against other uses of this methodology. A rapid appraisal based on qualitative field work is a better starting point for research because of its ability to discover relationships within the system that may not have been anticipated, its attention to context, possible significant saving of time, and the opportunity for full participation of local people as members of the research team.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE. The beginning point for understanding complex local systems has to be the understanding of those systems by local participants. The goal is to construct a model of the local system consistent with the way local people understand it. Doing so usually means trying to use local categories for dividing and describing reality. Using indigenous knowledge involves agreement on the most important components in the system and the most important problems or constraints faced by the local participants (Galt 1985:14). Indigenous knowledge of local systems cannot capture the totality of these systems and there will always be areas of local limited understanding of reality. Rapid appraisal can be expected to pick up the limited understanding of the local participants. Rapid appraisal, however, does not limit itself to indigenous knowledge, and can be expected to get at an understanding of local systems that goes beyond that of local participants, while, at the same time, including new areas of misunderstanding of reality not shared by local participants (see Galt 1985:15).

VARIABILITY. In many situations, the average farmer, student, small businessperson, or health care administrator exists only as an artifact of statistics. Each time an additional variable is used to define the average, fewer and fewer actual cases of the "average" can be found. In many situations, variability and distributions of characteristics are more important than the "average." Qualitative research approaches implemented without sufficient field work are especially prone to ignore variability. Ignoring variability can result in a very inaccurate understanding of a situation and is especially dangerous when it causes project implementers to conclude that outsiders can design interventions for the "average" and that the recipients need only to adopt them passively. Recognition of variability can be an important beginning point for developing programs based on providing people with expanded options where the value of their decisions is recognized.

Illustrative Research Techniques Associated with a Systems Perspective

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS. Semi-structured interviews using short guidelines are the key to rapid appraisal based on a systems perspective. The most important way of learning about local conditions is to ask local participants what they know. The rapid appraisal team should get people to talk on a subject and not just answer direct questions. Sufficient time must be invested to establish rapport and to explain the purpose of the rapid appraisal. The interview should be a dialogue or process in which important information develops out of casual conversation. The key to successful informal interviewing is to be natural and relaxed while guiding the conversation to a fruitful end. "Talk with people and listen to their concerns and views" (Rhoades 1982:17). Rhoades (1985:119–120) recommends the following to improve the interview:

"It is best to keep as low a profile . . . as possible."

"Avoid the opinion poll syndrome [with the] researchers driving up . . . and jumping out with notebook in hand ready to interview."

"Oversized vehicles bearing official looking numbers driven by chauffeurs should, if possible, be avoided."

"Walk as much as possible and in small numbers."

"Be sensitive to the fact that people may be suspicious of outsiders."

The semi-structured interview is flexible, but it is also controlled (Burgess 1982:107). This type of interviewing has also been called "unstructured interviewing," "conversation" (Burgess 1982:107), and "conversation with a purpose" (Webb and Webb 1932:130). It has been suggested that the rapid appraisal must keep respondents relating experiences and attitudes that are relevant to the problem, and encourage them to discuss these experiences naturally and freely. Keeping the interview moving naturally requires a few comments and remarks, together with an occasional question designed to keep the subject on the main theme, to secure more details, and to stimulate the conversation when it lags. Keeping the conservation moving freely requires culturally appropriate gestures, nods of the head, smiles, and facial expressions that reflect the emotions narrated. Researchers need to have understanding and sympathy for the informant's point of view. "They need to follow their informants' responses and to listen to them carefully in order that a decision can be made concerning the direction in which to take the interview. In short, researchers have to be able to share the culture of their informants" (Burgess 1982:108).

As a general rule, interviews should be conducted under conditions most relevant to and revealing about the local system being investigated. For example, a rapid appraisal on health care should include interviews in the clinics where services are provided, while a rapid appraisal on agriculture should include interviews in farmers' fields where the rapid appraisal team can see visible evidence of farmers' behavior. Actual observation permits the identification of new topics for discussion. Conducting as many interviews as possible at the site of the action being investigated is an important part of direct observation. The rapid appraisal team should always note where interviews were conducted.

SELECTION OF RESPONDENTS. It is useful to differentiate between "individual respondents" and "key informants," and to ensure that "individual respondents" are purposely selected to represent variability and that "key informants" are able to describe the broader system beyond their own direct participation. Better information is collected from "individual respondents" when it is clear to both the respondent and team members that questions concern only the individual's knowledge and behavior, and not what he or she thinks about the knowledge and behavior of others. Interviews should be conducted with an opportunity sample of purposely selected "individual respondents." They should be chosen because they

represent a wide range of individuals in the system being investigated and should not be limited to what is assumed to be representative or average. For example, an opportunity sample of farmers might include farmer leaders, farmers who have tried recommended technologies, innovative farmers who have successfully developed improved technologies, women farmers who are both members and heads of households, farmers who represent major cropping systems in the area, poor farmers with very limited resources, and traditional farmers who have resisted new technology. The bias of interviewing only one gender when both are involved in the systems must be avoided. Following George Honadle's (1979:45) strategy for avoiding biases when investigating organizations, the rapid appraisal team could ask for the names of one or more individual respondents who are known to disagree with all decisions, generally promote trouble, and never cooperate with development programs. Responses from these persons can provide valuable cross-checks and insights not available from other interviews.

Key informants are expected to be able to answer questions about the knowledge and behavior of others and especially about the operations of the broader systems. They are willing to talk and are assumed to have in-depth knowledge about the system. Key informants for a study of a school system might include student leaders, administrators, school board members, and leaders of parent-teacher associations. It is usually worthwhile to ask who or which group of people are most knowledgeable, and then to seek them out.

USE OF SHORT GUIDELINES. Even if there is agreement that rapid appraisal should not be based on a questionnaire, there is considerable disagreement on the extent to which the team should develop hypotheses and general guidelines before starting the rapid appraisal. The exploratory survey (Collinson 1982:49) at one extreme, uses more than 11 pages of questions as guidelines for examining farming systems. This detailed guideline is to be followed closely, with all questions being asked of at least some farmers. At the other extreme, the sondeo does not even offer a list of topics beyond what is proposed as an outline for the written report. Failure to offer specific questions appears to be premised on the belief that interviews with farmers or other people in the area should be very general and wide-ranging, "because the team is exploring and searching for an unknown number of elements" (Hildebrand 1982:291). It is claimed that a framework prepared before beginning a rapid appraisal can predispose team members toward their own ideas, thereby blocking opportunities to gain new insights. Experience suggests that the use of short guidelines prepared in advance can be useful as long as they are not relied on too much. "In this early phase, the researcher is like an explorer, making a rapid survey of the horizon before plunging into the thickets from which the wider view is no longer possible" (Rhoades 1982:5). While one may begin with guidelines, important questions and direction of the study emerge as information is collected. "One must be able to accommodate new information and adjust research plans accordingly" (Rhoades 1982:7).

Guidelines need not be viewed as an agenda to be diligently worked through, but should be viewed as an aid to memory and a reminder of what might be missed (Bottrall 1981:248 *in* Chambers 1983:25). "Not everything needs to be known. The key to rapid appraisal is to move quickly and surely to the main problems, opportunities and actions" (Chambers 1983:25).

INTERVIEWING INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS. Focus group interviews can be extremely useful in collecting certain types of information. Group interviews can be used in some cultures to collect information on topics where an individual may be penalized if he or she replies truthfully, but where a group talking about the community may not feel threatened (Chambers 1980: 14). Often similar topics can be taken up in interviews with groups and "key informants." Group interviews where individuals are free to correct each other and discuss issues can identify variability within the community and prevent an atypical situation from being confused with the average.

Experience suggests that group interviews may reveal what people believe are preferred patterns as opposed to what actually exists. A very detailed description of the local crop rotation system by a group of farmers was later found not to be practiced by any of them exactly as described (Beebe 1982). Even when some topics have been covered by a group interview, the same topics should still be covered with individuals. The question changes from "What do local participants generally do?" to "What do you do?" The presence of others often influences answers, and so those who are present during an interview may need to be noted. The presence of authority figures can be expected to influence comments. For a rapid appraisal on farming, visits to the farmers' fields may provide an opportunity to be alone with the farmers without the influence of others.

DIAGRAMS. Drawing diagrams and pictures allows both individuals and groups to express and check information in ways that are often more valid than linear prose. Checkland and Scholes (1990:45) argue the reason for this ". . . is that human affairs reveal a rich moving pageant of relationships, and pictures are a better means for recording relationships and connections." Types of diagrams include sketches, bar diagrams, histograms, flow diagrams, and decision trees (Chambers 1991:525).

USE OF INTERPRETERS. All members of a rapid appraisal team should speak the local language. In practice, however, one or more members of a team may not speak the local language and an interpreter will have to be used. There is no excuse for not learning and using appropriate greetings. Knowledge of numbers and even a very few key words can allow a team member to appear to be understanding more than they actually do, and can improve the quality of the translation. Interpreters should be chosen carefully to ensure that they understand technical words that are likely to be used in the questions or answers. Before the interview, the team should go over the interview strategy with the interpreter, emphasizing that the team is interested in more than just "answers" to "questions."

The interpreter should not be physically between the speaker and the person being interviewed, but rather beside or slightly behind so that his or her function is clearly indicated. The team member should speak in brief sentences using a minimum number of words to express complete thoughts. The interpreter should be given time to translate before proceeding to the next thought. The team member should talk directly to the respondent, as if the respondent could understand everything said (Bostain 1970:1).

FIELD NOTE PREPARATION. One strategy for improving observational skills is to record only actual observations in the field notes. Field notes should contain what is actually seen and

heard as opposed to the team members' interpretation of the event. Far too often the field notes will say something like:

> The farmer was angry because the price of rice had dropped.

The more useful field notes would report:

> The farmer ran towards the marketing board office with a large field knife in his hand. Before entering the office he was restrained by his companions. He could be heard screaming "The buying price this year is not even as high as the price they paid last year" (adopted from Pelto and Pelto 1978:70).

Field notes limited to careful observations can often prevent the observer from imputing false meaning to people's actions (Honadle 1979:42).

Basic Concept 2. Triangulation

The term triangulation comes from navigation or physical surveying and describes an operation for finding a position or location by means of bearings from two known fixed points. When applied to rapid appraisal, it means systematically combining the observations of individuals with different backgrounds and combining different research methods. The assumption is that for most situations there is no one "best" way to obtain information, and even if there were, it could not be foreseen in advance. Triangulation involves conscious, nonrandom selection of research methods and team members based on the resources available and the system being investigated. Triangulation of individuals and methods improves the quality of information and provides crosschecks.

Illustrative Research Techniques Associated with Triangulation

Multidisciplinary teams. By definition, rapid appraisal cannot be done by one person. The expertise brought to the situation by the team members may be the most critical component of rapid appraisal. It is important for practitioners to understand the rationale for a team effort and the types of mixes that are likely to be most effective for triangulation. Team members should represent a range of disciplines that are most relevant to the topic. For example, a rapid appraisal team investigating health practices might include a social worker, a medical doctor, a "traditional" healer, and a public administration specialist. An agricultural development rapid appraisal team might include an agricultural economist and an agronomist. Semi-structured individual and group interviews provide numerous opportunities for triangulation as team members representing different disciplines initiate varied lines of inquiry and raise issues that otherwise could be overlooked. Team members can benefit from learning each others' special vocabularies, values, and conceptual models.

The disciplinary specialty of each team member often is not as critical as having different disciplines represented. Both men and women should be included on the team (Shaner, Philipp, and Schmehl 1982:74), and all team members should have some familiarity with all aspects of the system being investigated (Chambers 1983:23). Teams should be composed of a mix of insiders from and outsiders to the system being investigated. Outsiders are able to share experience and knowledge from other systems and their participation can be extremely valuable to the insiders in identifying possible options and in noting constraints that might otherwise be overlooked. At the same time, outsiders gain insights and knowledge from insiders that can guide their understanding of other systems investigated in the future.

Participation of insiders as full team members is one way of "putting people first." Robert Chambers (1991:515) notes that:

> where people and their wishes and priorities are not put first, projects that affect and involve them encounter problems. Experience . . . shows that where people are consulted, where they participate freely, where their needs and priorities are given primacy in project identification, design, implementation, and monitoring, then economic and social performance are better and development is more sustainable.

Smaller teams are always preferred to larger teams. Members of large teams are more likely to talk to one another and less likely to listen and learn from others than are members of small teams (Rhoades 1982:16). Large teams often intimidate respondents; are more likely to be conservative and cautious; and take longer to produce a report and recommendations (Chambers 1983:23).

Information collected in advance. The combination of semi-structured interviews, information collected in advance, and direct observation provides rapid appraisal with some of the methodological strength usually associated with traditional qualitative approaches. Robert Chambers (1980:8) notes that despite the wealth of information in archives, annual reports, reports of surveys, academic papers, government statistics, etc., rapid appraisal teams often ignore these sources of data. This failure to collect basic data in advance of the rapid appraisal means that field research time is wasted in collecting already available data. Moreover, important research leads and topics suggested by previously collected material may be missed. The structure of the rapid appraisal process makes certain types of information collected in advance more relevant than others. For example, maps and aerial photos are especially relevant when a team visits an area for the first time.

Direct observation. Direct observation is an important rapid appraisal tool for validating data collected in advance, providing multiple checks on data collected from interviews, and suggesting additional topics for interviews. Direct observation can prevent rapid appraisal from being misled by myth (Chambers 1980:12). "Do it yourself" is an abbreviated form of participant observation where team members undertake an activity themselves. Doing so allows insights and prompts the volunteering of information that otherwise might not be accessible (Chambers 1991:524). Depending upon the situation, several specific direct observation techniques have been found relevant. Where locally accepted, a camera can be an extremely important research tool. Photos can be used to document conditions before an intervention. Sometimes the rapid appraisal team can do the local respondents a favor by sending back or returning with photos (Rhoades 1982:19). Agro-ecological transects based on systematic walks can document diverse conditions along a line, for example, from the highest to the lowest point (Chambers 1991:524, WRI 19:018). Agro-ecological transects help ensure that direct observations include attention to variability and that poorer areas and microenvironments are

not ignored. The preparation of sketch maps (and farm sketches) provide powerful visual tools that encourage the rapid appraisal team and local people to view community issues from a spatial perspective (WRI 1990:13). The use of proxy or nonobtrusive indicators, such as the presence of a sewing machine in a rural household, can provide shortcuts to insights about conditions and changes, especially when these indicators are identified by the participants in the local system.

Basic Concept 3. Iterative Data Collection and Analysis

Rapid appraisal is a process during which the researchers begin with information collected in advance, and then progressively learn from each other and from information provided by semi-structured interviews and direct observations. While the rapid appraisal team is searching for trends, patterns, and opportunities for generalization, the iterative nature of the process allows for the discovery of the unexpected. Rapid appraisal can be thought of as an open system using feedback to "learn" from its environment and progressively change itself. The research effort is structured to encourage participants to rapidly change questions, interviews, and direction as new information appears.

Rapid appraisal is divided between blocks of time used for collecting information and blocks of time during which the team considers the information collected and makes conscious decisions about additional methodology and lines of inquiry. These decisions include: what questions or subtopics to revise, add, or delete; what methods, tools, and techniques to change; where to go next; and what to do upon arrival (Grandstaff and Grandstaff 1985:10). The process is basically the same process as that used in "grounded theory," where instead of disproving preconceived hypotheses through the collection of data, new data are used to clarify the hypotheses.

Illustrative Research Techniques Associated with Iterative Information Collection and Analysis

Rapid appraisals must be scheduled to allow adequate time for group interaction and for collecting additional information. Often, time is set aside at either the beginning or the end of the day for team interaction. While the rapid appraisal is an iterative process itself, it is also part of a larger iterative process in which the results from the study are considered exploratory and subject to change either as new and better information is collected or as the situation changes.

Structuring the research time. Opinions differ considerably on how to structure the time of a rapid appraisal, but there is almost universal agreement on the importance of dividing time between collecting data and team interaction to make sense out of the collected data. Interaction between researchers at the end of each day and at the end of the field work is essential for success. Scheduling is necessary to ensure that there will be adequate time for group interaction and for returning to the field to collect additional information. The joint preparation of the rapid appraisal report by the team can be an important part of the iterative process.

The most common problem with rapid appraisals is failure to allow sufficient time. At a minimum there has to be time for multiple iterations. There is also a need for sufficient time to be observant, sensitive, and eclectic (Carruthers and Chambers 1981:418). Attempts at rapid appraisal carried out with insufficient time and inadequate planning should probably be called "tourism" (Chambers 1980:2), which introduces predictable biases into the process including inappropriate focus on elements of the system that are most obvious, observation of systems when it is physically easiest to observe, contact with individuals already involved in projects, and contact with individuals who are less disadvantaged (Chambers 1980:3). Inadequate time can also result in too much attention to the observed and not enough to the relationships, and failure to recognize that what is seen is a moment in time and not necessarily a trend which may be more important. The length of a rapid appraisal will depend upon the situation, but anything less than four days is probably inadequate for carrying out discussions; for identifying, discussing, modifying and rejecting ideas that emerge from these discussions; and for putting these ideas together in a usable form (Chambers 1983:28). Investing too much time and effort in a rapid appraisal is also not desirable. An appraisal that is too long may waste project time and cause participants to view the rapid appraisal as an end in itself instead of a tool for starting the learning process.

Flexibility

It is the simultaneous application of the three basic concepts and the quick results, and not the specific research techniques, that differentiates rapid appraisal from other approaches to research. While there are research techniques associated with the basic concepts that have proven effective under different conditions, these are not the only techniques available. Since rapid appraisal is not defined by a specific set of techniques, there is real flexibility in the process. Factors that influence how a specific rapid appraisal will be implemented include: available resources, research roles, subject matter, prior information available, and the complexity of the system being investigated (Grandstaff and Grandstaff 1985:11). The more limited the rapid appraisal team is in terms of discipline expertise, experience with interdisciplinary work, and experience with rapid appraisal, the more the need for explicit routines and attention to the selection of techniques (Grandstaff and Grandstaff 1985:11).

Experience with rapid appraisal in rural areas at Khon Kaen University in Thailand suggests that more than about five hours per day spent in semi-structured interviewing sessions proves exhaustive to even the heartiest team members and makes subsequent interviews less productive. More than about five days of this kind of fieldwork without a break can, however, be counterproductive. These kinds of time constraints operate on the schedule of fieldwork, not the overall length of the rapid appraisal (Grandstaff and Grandstaff 1985:12).

Available information collected in advance can have a major effect on methodology, even to the extent of showing that something else is needed instead of, or in addition to, the rapid appraisal. The content of the review will affect the initial guidelines used for semi-structured interviews. When specific information is not available prior to the study, extra time and special techniques may be required to gather it.

Confidence in Rapid Appraisal and Data Collection Checklists

Flexibility is critical to making rapid appraisal relevant to a wide range of systems and is a major strength of the approach. This flexibility can, however, be abused and has been interpreted by some as allowing individuals to do anything, or almost nothing, and call it "rapid appraisal." A set of standard techniques could solve this problem, but only at the expense of the needed flexibility. The alternative to standardization is to document as part of the rapid appraisal report the techniques used. Checklists that document what was done allow the readers of a report to judge the quality of the work and can also remind the rapid appraisal team of important issues during the appraisal. A generic checklist is suggested that must be adapted to the specific situation under which the appraisal is implemented.[2]

Conclusion

"It will perhaps always be a struggle to argue, however valid the case, that it is better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong" (Carruthers and Chambers 1981:418).

Rapid appraisal provides relatively quick qualitative results that are likely to be vaguely right and that can be used for decisions about additional research or preliminary decisions for the design and implementation of applied activities. When applied with care and caution, it can help a decision maker avoid being precisely wrong. Rapid appraisal makes use of selected techniques from the social sciences and it is not suggested that rapid appraisal can substitute for more long-term, in-depth studies, where a situation calls for more than being vaguely right. In many situations, however, being vaguely right is adequate for the design of additional research, to initiate activities which have to be started quickly, or to make mid-course corrections during implementation. In some situations, initial understanding of complex systems requires the different perspectives of team members with distinct disciplinary training and local participants. Team efforts are possible in the long term, but they are not as likely. Correctly done, rapid appraisal is always better than a quick-and-dirty "tourist" approach during the first phases of an investigation. If done too quickly and without sufficient methodological rigor, however, rapid appraisal can be more dangerous than "tourism" when it results in inappropriate confidence being placed in the results.

The experience of those who have used the approach suggests that rapid appraisal could be relevant to a much wider audience. For individuals who have had limited experience with qualitative techniques, there is a need to provide a strong rationale for and an introduction to it; and to help experienced qualitative researchers understand ways in which rapid appraisal differs from traditional approaches. There is general consensus from users that rapid appraisal is best learned while participating as a team member with someone with experience, but that since rapid appraisal is "organized common sense," it can be self-taught. A 17 minute instructional video has been developed that features the use of rapid appraisal by a Foster Parents Plan project in Guatemala. The video is available in both US and PAL video standards and demonstrates some of the techniques, applications, and principles involved (Scrimshaw and Hurtado 1987). It is hoped that sufficient information is provided in this paper to help current users of rapid appraisal do a better job, to allow new users to experiment with the approach, and to convince potential decision-makers who are the clients for rapid appraisal they can have confidence in the results.

This paper has suggested that there are three basic concepts associated with rapid appraisal: (1) a system perspective, (2) triangulation of data collection, and (3) iterative data collection and analysis; and that the use of these concepts to select specific research techniques can provide a flexible, but rigorous, approach to relatively quick qualitative research data that goes beyond a "tourist" approach. The paper has identified numerous specific research techniques while arguing that there are other techniques associated with the three concepts, and that even the techniques mentioned will often have to be adapted to the specific purpose of the study and local conditions. While rapid appraisal shares many of the characteristics of traditional, qualitative research, it differs in that it requires more than one researcher, team interaction is part of the methodology, and results are produced faster. The paper has noted that the most common problem for rapid appraisal is the failure to allow sufficient time to be observant, sensitive, eclectic, and to have multiple iterations of data collection and analysis. Finally the paper has suggested the use of a "Checklist for Rapid Appraisal Data Collection" to remind the team of important issues during the appraisal and to document what was done.

NOTES

[1] Members of the working group, in addition to the author were Terry Grandstaff, M. A. Hamid, and Neil Jamieson.

[2] Sample Checklist for Rapid Appraisal Data Collection

Title: [1] _____

Objectives: _____

_____

Field work dates: _____

Report completion date: _____

Rapid Appraisal Team composition

Name tech. background Language[2] Local[3] Experience[4]

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

1. The title should include the name of the geographic or administrative unit and the unit of analysis.
2. Language use categories
   1. Exclusive use of respondents' first language
   2. Use of respondents' second language
   3. Mixture of respondents' first and second languages
   4. Mixture of respondents' languages and use of interpreter
   5. Exclusive use of interpreters
3. Local or outsider categories:
   1. From site, living and working there
   2. From outside the area
4. Categories for prior experience
   0. No prior experience doing Rapid Appraisal
   T. Participation in a training course on Rapid Appraisal
   1. to n. Number of prior Rapid Appraisals

Number of hours spent in field collecting data _____

Number of hours spent by team in discussions of data _____

Information collected in advance and reviewed by the team

Types of information collected by direct observation

Number of individual respondents interviewed

Method of selection

Place of interviews

Among individual respondents approximately what percent were from different groups relevant to the system being investigated?

For example,

women ____ %, old people ____ %, youth ____ %

from among the poorest 25 percent ____ %

from among the 25 percent who live farthest from the road ____ %

(note average distance in km. ____ from road)

from significant ethnic or cultural minorities ____ %

from those identified as "trouble makers" ____ %

Number of key informants interviewed

Method of selecting key informants

Positions/occupation of key informants and topics they reported on

Topics for group interviews and composition of groups

Date set for reviewing and updating this report:

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