Arlen Etling
Professor and Director
International Programs Division
Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources
University of Nebraska, Lincoln


Needs assessment for rural development projects just got easier. After several JIAEE articles, a number of scholarly paper presentations and considerable discussion about needs assessment among AIAEE members, now there is a workbook. The *Participatory Rural Appraisal and Planning Workbook* will guide those who wish to complete a needs assessment which is thorough, effective in the use of limited time and other resources, and involves rural residents who are supposed to benefit from a development project.

Previously a handbook on participatory needs assessment, *Participatory Rural Appraisal Handbook: Conducting PRAs In Kenya* (1990), was published by the Center for International Development and Environment, World Resources Institute, in collaboration with the National Environment Secretariat of the Government of Kenya, Clark University (Worcester, MA), and Egerton University (Njoro, Kenya). PRA was based on an earlier methodology called “rapid rural appraisal” (RRA) developed by Gordon Conway, International Institute for Environment and Development, and Robert Chambers, University of Sussex, England. That handbook has been out of print for several years.

The current workbook takes the previous work on RRA and PRA further, refining the methodology and providing additional specific instruments to make the needs assessment process more practical. The workbook also gives numerous examples from assessments conducted in Latin America. It adds an emphasis on the planning (hence PRAP) that should follow the needs assessment. It also introduces discussion of the gender perspective which has been often ignored.

According to the workbook, the PRAP process has three steps: 1) site selection, 2) preliminary visit and 3) application of PRAP. This is a simplification of the 1990 handbook process which described eight steps: 1) site selection, 2) preliminary visits by the PRA team, 3) data collection, 4) data synthesis and analysis, 5) ranking problems, 6) ranking opportunities, 7) adopting a village resource management plan, and 8) implementation of the plan. PRA also emphasized a team of outside officials, technical specialists and local villagers. The current workbook speaks only of the facilitators and community members.

Data collection with PRA, as well as PRAP, consists of a variety of technical and social assessments including mapping, description of social organization, depiction of institutional relationships, development of historical timelines and seasonal trends. PRA puts more emphasis on technical measures (soil type, land use, rainfall records) while PRAP focuses on the social aspects. PRAP adds a number of instruments to collect data on family livelihood, income, expenses, and well-being. It adds a “gender disaggregated activity calendar” to quantify the use of family members’ time and to point out that all “productive” work is not done just by males, that all reproductive work is not done just by females, and that community or collective work is necessary and should be counted.
The PRAP workbook introduces techniques to analyze and prioritize problems that are identified through data analysis. It does not, however, describe nominal group process, a structured group technique which this reviewer has used successfully in Latin America to achieve a truly participatory needs assessment. Still the workbook does go well beyond PRA’s very limited advice for prioritizing problems.

Project planning is enhanced in the PRAP workbook by the use of a program planning matrix. By constructing this matrix participants answer questions about project objectives, justification, results, indicators of success, means of verification, activities, timetable, inputs, budget and persons responsible. This information, written in detail, will then guide project implementation. The last section of the workbook (35 pages) provides case studies of the use of different needs assessment techniques during actual PRAP sessions in Latin America.

The result is a workbook which provides a wealth of resources for grassroots project development. This result is not surprising given the experience of the lead author and the strong reputation of the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction. Daniel Selener is the author of Farmer to Farmer Extension: Lessons From the Field (1997), and Documenting, Evaluating and Learning From Our Development Projects (1996), reviewed in recent issues of JIAEE.

Some individuals might criticize the workbook for describing too many techniques in such detail. They might argue that needs assessment, as described in the workbook, is almost as expensive, at least in terms of time, as the statistical research reports which rapid rural appraisals were developed to replace. This reviewer is concerned that much of the technical data collection by team members with technical expertise has been discarded. What remains is a much more in-depth collection of sociological data. Given the experience on which PRAP and this workbook are based, however, those concerns may not be important.

This workbook should be useful to students of community development, to administrators and specialists in governmental agencies and NGOs that work with community development as well as to village-level workers. To order, send a check for twenty-five US dollars payable to IIRR. The check should be issued from a bank located in the USA and sent to IIRR, Apartado Postal 17-08-8494, Quito, Ecuador.

Reviewed by:

Arlen Etling, Professor and Director
International Programs Division
Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources
110 Ag Hall, PO Box 830706
University of Nebraska, Lincoln,
Lincoln, NE 68583-0706.
(402) 472-2758 (voice)
(402) 472-2759 (fax)
aetling1@unl.edu