CONSTRUCTING AND CONDUCTING RURAL APPRAISALS

Harry A. Carey, Professor
Department of Agricultural and Extension Education
The Pennsylvania State University
323 Agricultural Administration Building
University Park, PA 16802-2601
(814) 863-7869
(814) 863-4753 (fax)
hac2@psu.edu

Arlen W. Etling, Associate Professor
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication
University of Nebraska, Lincoln
114 Ag Hall, P.O. Box 830700
Lincoln, NE 68583-0700
(402) 472-9008
(402) 472-9024 (fax)
aetling@unlvm.unl.edu

Abstract

Rural appraisal, rapid appraisal, and participatory rural appraisal are terms used for methods of village needs assessment, resource assessment, and evaluation. These terms have generated considerable interest and some confusion recently since a variety of techniques have been used and misused. This article looks at rural appraisal as a category consisting of two methodologies - rapid appraisal and participatory rural appraisal. Different techniques that have been included under both methodologies are described. A design kit section describes how a rural appraisal strategy can be developed for specific situations. The design kit emphasizes flexibility and practicality, and suggests guidelines to insure that the needs identified will result in an action plan to resolve the problems of individuals most directly affected. Examples from rural appraisals conducted by the authors in Pennsylvania, Zimbabwe, Puerto Rico, and Costa Rica are included.

Introduction

Rural appraisal, rapid appraisal, and participatory rural appraisal are terms that have become widespread in the last ten years. For some individuals these terms are buzz words with only vague meanings. For some quantitative researchers they are just another excuse for not using a rigorous study to collect and analyze data correctly. For some field workers, on the other hand, rural appraisal promises a middle ground between two undesirable extremes. At one extreme is the quantitative study that takes too much time and money, that relies too heavily on statistical procedures and too little on common sense, and that sits on a shelf somewhere outside the local site where the information is needed. At the other extreme is the superficial assessment made by a quick trip to the site or a recording of prejudices from an office in the capital city.

In this article rural appraisal is defined and clarified. Some suggestions about when to use rural appraisal are made. Alternative approaches to rural appraisal are discussed. Issues in planning for a rural appraisal are presented. Then a design kit is discussed to help field workers conduct a needs assessment in particular locations with flexibility and attention to unique local conditions.
Clarifying Confusing Terms

Rural appraisal is understood to be a category of resource assessment or needs assessment methods. Two of these methods are rapid appraisal and participatory rural appraisal (PRA). Both rapid appraisal and PRA are methods of obtaining grassroots knowledge with an interdisciplinary focus. Rapid appraisal is more flexible than PRA, a specific method developed by Gordon Conway and Robert Chambers. Derived from rapid appraisal, PRA was developed to assess village resources in Kenya to implement "...socially acceptable, economically viable, and ecologically sustainable development" (World Resources Institute, 1990, pp. 2-5). PRA consists of eight clearly defined steps. While the two methods are similar in many ways, rapid appraisal emphasizes speed, low cost, and flexibility, while PRA emphasizes participation of local (village) people in a process carefully structured to insure participation.

Popularity of Rural Appraisals

A number of presentations at the annual conference of the Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education reflect a growing interest in rapid appraisal and PRA among rural development workers, academics, and representatives of non-governmental organizations (Elliot & Martin, 1989; Mutimba, 1996; Smith, Etling & Diamond, 1991; Woog, Kelleher & Turner, 1992). A glance at publication lists of international development agencies also demonstrates growing interest. A recent World Bank study, Rapid Appraisal Methods (Kumar, 1993), reviews techniques and issues associated with rapid appraisal.

In addition to rural appraisal experiences in other countries, the authors have taught and led rural appraisals as a field component of a university class on problem solving in tropical agriculture. This course included a field trip to Puerto Rico to assess the needs of limited resource farmers. Rapid appraisal and PRA were used, on different field trips, as the primary needs assessment method to teach students, and to assist limited resource farmers and the agencies that assist them, namely Soil Conservation Service, Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture, and Cooperative Extension Service. University students, Puerto Rican farmers and agency personnel have found rural appraisal to be an interesting process with useful outcomes.

What is Rapid Appraisal?

A rapid appraisal is an initial effort to gain some understanding about a specific rural situation to make immediate decisions or plan more extensive projects. It is a collage of snapshots of problems, needs, and opportunities at a particular time. It looks at the relationships among livestock, crops, management, markets, household and family characteristics, social interactions, and cultural information. Rapid appraisal is tailored to the local situation and does not follow a structured methodology. The objectives of the rapid appraisal are clearly identified, and the design of the rapid appraisal process is aimed at accomplishing those objectives. These objectives guide the selection of team members who will conduct the rapid appraisal.

According to Beebe (1985), different names have been used for rapid appraisal, including:

1. Sondeo. A team gathers descriptions of local farm operations to identify new technology for trials on farmers' fields. This method allows flexibility to pursue various lines of discussion.

2. Exploratory survey. A series of interviews using a very detailed checklist of questions is done. The list is so extensive that not all questions are asked of all farmers, but a composite is made later. The results are used to diagnose farm problems and opportunities for farm trials.

3. Reconnaissance survey. This is an informal method of collecting data for decisions related to possible field trials, and as a means of developing teamwork. It is a general approach.
with the flexibility to use both the sondeo and exploratory survey methods.

4. **Informal agricultural survey.** This technique emphasizes observation as a way to gain information and experience. It focuses more on the study process than the content.

5. **Rapid reconnaissance.** This method emphasizes participatory approaches using quick, impressionistic data collection to study the organization and management of rural development efforts.

Rapid appraisal is especially useful, according to Kumar (1993), when (a) descriptive information is desired, such as economic conditions of an area, (b) it is important to learn about the motivations and attitudes that affect a population's behavior, (c) available quantitative data are to be interpreted or inconsistencies need to be resolved, (d) a study's purpose is to generate recommendations/solve problems or provide direction, or (e) there is a need to develop new challenges and proposals for formal, more elaborate studies.

Kumar (1993) identifies five techniques that may be used separately, or in combination, as the core of a rapid appraisal.

1. **Key informant interviews.** From 10 to 25 informants who can provide the desired information and insights are interviewed using a structured list of questions.

2. **Community/group interviews.** The investigator interacts with a larger group (over 15) of villagers in an open public meeting. The moderator insures representation of women and minorities, asks relevant questions, ensures participation by all present, and records the proceedings.

3. **Structured direct observation.** Data are carefully gathered using structured observation criteria. The use of a team with diverse topical expertise is better than a single individual.

4. **Informal surveys.** An open-ended questionnaire is used in interviewing 25 to 50 people, often at convenient locations such as a market or other meeting place.

5. **Focus group discussions.** From 8 to 12 participants representing a target group are immersed in a one to two hour discussion on an issue. Participants discuss the issue freely. A focus group leader is prepared to ask questions related to the issue if participant input lags (Etling & Maloney, 1995, pp. 42-47).

**What is Participatory Rural Appraisal?**

PRA follows eight steps that are mostly similar to rapid appraisal except that local people/stakeholders are full participants, along with the appraisal team, in determining the conclusions and recommendations, and in identifying and ranking problems and opportunities. In addition, there is an emphasis on creating a community development plan to be implemented by the community, with assistance from appropriate officials, agencies, organizations, and stakeholders from the private sector. The eight steps of Participatory Rural Appraisal (Ford, 1989) are (a) site selection and clearance from local officials, (b) preliminary site visit, (c) data collection, (d) data synthesis and analysis, (e) problem identification and listing of possible opportunities/solutions, (f) ranking opportunities/solutions and preparing a village resource management plan, (g) adoption and implementation of the plan, and (h) follow-up, evaluation, and dissemination of findings.

PRA is more structured in data collection than rapid appraisal. Data that are needed for a PRA include:

1. **Time-related data** that show important historical events, trends in weather patterns and markets, and seasonal calendars that indicate labor needs.

2. **People-oriented data** gathered through household interviews to show family problems and opportunities related to agricultural enterprises.
3. **Technical data** from local agencies that show soil types, infrastructure, crop production, weather patterns, available agricultural resources, etc.

4. **Institutional data** which show the organizations that deal with the local village, their impact on the village, and their relationships with each other.

5. **Spatial data** from local maps, transects, farm sketches, and direct observation that include elevation, slope, drainage, and other physical features. A transect can capture the diversity of topography as well as the diversity of land use. Team members draw the transect by walking and recording a straight-line description through an area. It normally cuts across the diverse agro-ecological zones in the area to show the range of topography, soils, crops, livestock, and other characteristics (World Resources Institute, 1990, pp. 11-55).

**Considerations in Planning Rural Appraisals**

![Figure 1. Example of a Transect From a Participatory Rural Appraisal in Puerto Rico](image)

Certain questions must be addressed and study parameters defined at the outset to govern the design of the study process. This lays the groundwork to guide specific design decisions. Relevant questions include:

1. What are the study objectives? What information should be collected; how will it be used? From whom will the information be collected? Who will benefit from the new information? What are the goals relating to the team itself? Have team members interacted to develop teamwork?

2. How much time is available to plan and conduct the rural appraisal? Some suggest that from four days to three weeks is appropriate for a rapid appraisal, and longer for a PRA.

3. What resources (e.g., people, experience, translators, computers, typists, transportation, etc.) will be available to conduct the appraisal?
4. How will respondents be selected to provide the desired information? Should respondents include farmers (e.g., poor, wealthy, male, female, ethnic representation), neighbors, input suppliers, marketing people, government agency personnel, community leaders, local educators?

5. What will be the mix of individual and group interviews, direct observation, team discussion, and recording? Ample time should be planned for team members to discuss daily findings.

6. How will interviews be structured? What questions should be asked? What form will the reports take? What process will be used to develop the final report?

7. Based on the answers to the above questions, should a rapid appraisal or PRA method be used?

If time is short, resources are limited, and the rural appraisal needed is only preliminary, then a rapid appraisal is likely to be the best approach. Data gathering methodology should be tailored to a given situation. The strategy may utilize any of the techniques described in the descriptions of rapid appraisal and PRA above, or the given situation may require an adaptation of these techniques.

If local participation in the process is extremely important and a comprehensive appraisal is needed, then PRA should be considered. If the time and resources are available to complete the eight steps of PRA then using PRA will likely produce more and stronger results.

**Rural Appraisal Design Kit**

Ideas and suggestions to plan a specific rural appraisal strategy are included in this section, which is organized according to the Participatory Rural Appraisal methodology. Examples from the authors’ experiences with rural appraisal are also included.

If PRA is selected, every step below needs to be carefully considered in the strategy. If the rapid appraisal method is selected, those elements which fit the local needs and the appraisal team's objectives, time and resources may be used, and other elements may be ignored.

1. **Site selection, local officials' clearance, and informing officials and the community.**
   a. A field worker may identify a community in need; a community may request assistance; a regional/national leader or external donor/consultant may identify an opportunity.
   b. Possible rural appraisal approaches are described to community leaders.
   c. If the decision is to conduct an appraisal, the plans should be communicated to all involved.

   In the authors' experience, three different decision-makers selected the site. In Pennsylvania, the class instructors selected the site according to the learning needs of the students and the ability of the farmers to respond to questions. In Puerto Rico, the Soil Conservation Service professional determined the site according to accessibility and readiness of the farmers to use the information and recommendations. In Costa Rica and Zimbabwe, the decision was made by donor representatives in collaboration with the agency being studied.

2. **Team composition and orientation.**
   a. Team membership should be based on community needs and objectives of the rural appraisal. The team leader needs prior experience in rural appraisal and good organizational and communications skills.
   b. People from a variety of technical disciplines should be represented on the team. They may be agronomists, horticulturists, plant pathologists, conservationists, engineers, livestock specialists, farm management specialists, economists, sociologists, educators, leadership specialists, family resource specialists, organizational development specialists, and perhaps others depending
on the local situation and objectives of the rural appraisal.
c. Technical specialists who work in the local area, and/or community leaders should be utilized to assure that a good understanding of the local situation is infused into the process.
d. Interview teams should be kept small (2-3 people), with a mixture of technical specialties, gender, and local orientation. A blend of insiders and outsiders is recommended.
e. Team members should be given a thorough orientation on the appraisal process and their respective roles in its implementation. Team member training might include an interview demonstration, an opportunity for each member to "act out" an interview, and practice in the field. Discussions should include how to obtain unbiased information and how to set up the interview so farmers or others speak as freely and honestly as possible. This may include dressing very informally, maybe not even taking notes or carrying a notebook, being as down-to-earth as possible, being patient and listening well, not overdirecting the interview, sometimes following the direction that the discussion leads.
f. The team should discuss the kinds of information that should be recorded, and how much structure the interview should take. It should decide if objectives are better met by focusing on averages or by seeking variability. It is usually recommended not to overly structure interviews, but merely guide discussions. Information might be recorded only after return to the team’s vehicle.
g. The entire team should meet at the end of each day to discuss and assemble findings, and to review the strengths and weaknesses of the rural appraisal strategy they have developed. Adjustments in the data collection process may be necessary to gain increased information and insight into an unforeseen problem or opportunity.

3. Preliminary data search.
   a. Information on the study area such as population, topography, infrastructure, rainfall and average temperatures, soils and land use, crops, yields, livestock patterns, etc., should be collected from agencies before collecting local data.
   b. Data from maps, aerial photographs, recent censuses, reports from government agencies and farm-related organizations, project reports and papers can be found in international, national, regional, and local government and agency offices, educational institutions, libraries, service organizations, cooperatives, and input suppliers.

   In Pennsylvania, there was no preliminary data search since the PRA was limited to the opinions of farmers and the agencies that served them. In Puerto Rico, extensive library and computer searches, supplemented with reports from agencies in Puerto Rico were compiled into a monograph that the PRA team carried to Puerto Rico. In Costa Rica and Zimbabwe, preliminary data were provided by the donor organizations from previous projects and studies, from related agencies and educational institutions, and from the agency being studied.

4. Preliminary site visit.
   a. The team may meet with a variety of people from the target community to explain the methodology and stress that the appraisal should lead to a community development plan. PRA refers to this as a village resource management plan.
   b. It is important to maintain a balance between community self-sufficiency and external assistance.
   c. Community representatives may want to discuss the proposed rural appraisal process among themselves.
   d. If the proposed appraisal process is accepted, a community planning meeting should be organized to discuss problems, possible solutions, and how the rural appraisal might address some of their concerns.
5. **Data collection.** The techniques indicated below, and fully described with examples in the PRA handbook of the World Resources Institute (1990, pp 11-55) offer possible choices to a team in collecting data.

a. Direct observation can be used with an initial drive-through orientation to the area. This technique can also be used to cross-check data gathered by other techniques. Direct observation can validate data collected in other ways, and provide topics for further discussion. Photographs can be very useful to record situations for more accurate recall later or to show to others. Carefully written field notes are a must.

b. Continue to look for maps, aerial photographs, recent censuses, reports from government agencies and farm-related organizations, project reports, and papers. Visit local field technicians, government agencies, libraries, donors, and universities.

c. Farm sketches can show how farm families manage the land. This is done by mapping the fields, along with notes on land use, and qualitative and quantitative data. Farms may be chosen along the transect line to represent the different types of land and land uses.

d. Time lines can provide insights into community changes that are occurring over time. This can include information on key events, trends, community groups and organizations, and problems in the community.

e. Trend lines can show changes in resources, population, education, production, costs, labor, rainfall, crop acreage, wooded areas, irrigation usage, and erosion, over time.

f. A seasonal calendar presents a wide variety of information, usually in chart form, to show when activities and practices occur throughout the year. Typical information in a calendar would be items like the rainy season, temperature, cropping and livestock patterns, and working patterns and labor supply/demand.

g. Household interviews enable gathering of socio-economic/cultural information from a wide variety of types of farm families, aiming at farm and home resource management. These should include some local people who are not otherwise included in group interviews. Data should include family history, number, gender, family health and survival rate, level of education, farm and household water sources, fuelwood supply and its future, transportation, local organizations, farm workers, farm and off-farm sources of income, house and buildings, farm implements used, land resources, cropping and livestock production, conservation measures, farm inputs, products consumed and products sold, sources of farming advice and information, ag-related problems and possible solutions, awareness of community institutions, and organizations that impact the family.

h. Organizational analysis helps provide an understanding of the role of locally-involved organizations such as government agencies, credit institutions, various groups (men, women, youth, civic), cooperatives and associations, schools, and church groups, etc. The purpose is to learn about each organization's activities and role in community development, how the organization is seen by various community members, and interrelationships between organizations and local residents.

6. **Data synthesis and analysis.** The large amount of collected data must be organized and condensed into manageable units for assessment and ranking. Many separate items may be combined into one. Problem descriptions that are too general should be avoided.

a. Divide this task among team members so that each member is involved in preparing some portion of the report. Sections of the report are divided by topics such as land and soils, crops, livestock, forestry, plant/animal production problems, water, non-farm income, health, education, etc. Most rapid appraisals focus on a limited
topic, such as improving farm income. Therefore, the report will reflect this, even though a wide range of community influences should be understood. Many investigators caution against underestimating the time it takes to do this step adequately.

b. Recommendation domains is a label given to farming areas that have very similar characteristics and circumstances. The idea is that new innovations and technology transfer methodologies should be effective throughout a homogeneous area. Care, however, must be taken to see the variation of farming systems within a given geographic area. Rural appraisal team members should be sensitive to these variations and modify the gathering of data to provide information on those differences.

7. Problem identification and possible solution.
   a. Utilize team interaction to discuss, modify, and approve the reports, prioritize problems, and draw conclusions regarding problems and solutions. Local technicians and leaders should be included in this step so that local experience is represented.
   b. The PRA team, along with the local leaders, develops a list of problems and solutions.

8. Ranking opportunities/solutions to problems and community development plan.
   a. Involvement of community leaders, local committee and institution representatives, farmers, farmer groups, and other stakeholders in the process of ranking problems and possible solutions is often considered the most important step in the PRA process. Cleaver (1993, p. 43) relates to the need for local participation: “The growing democratization process in Africa... will give rural people more influence in government and a greater participatory role in local efforts...” The participation of farmers in the planning process will ensure their cooperation later during the implementation phase.
   b. The literature on PRA is weak in describing specific steps to accomplish this crucial step. The authors have found that the nominal group process (NGP) works extremely well to insure participation of all present to rank opportunities/possible solutions. NGP was used in Pennsylvania, Zimbabwe, Puerto Rico, and Costa Rica with excellent results.

Steps in the nominal group process include an Introduction that describes the process and states the issue in very specific terms. For example: “By this time next year the Camuy Association of Limited Resource Farmers should have accomplished the following...”

   Step 1. Participants silently write answers that complete the issue statement.
   Step 2. Participants, in small groups, list their answers on easel pads without discussion.
   Step 3. Small groups debate the responses on the pads.
   Step 4. Small groups vote (secret ballot) on the top three ideas (from the easel).
   Step 5. Each small group leader tallies the votes and reports to the entire assembly. The assembly eliminates duplication then debates the ideas of the small groups using the pads.
   Step 6. Each participant votes on the top 3-5 ideas from all of the easel pads.
   Step 7. Results of the voting are announced (a priority list of ideas from the easel pads) and the assembly decides how the priorities will be addressed. (Etling & Maloney, 1995, pp. 30-32).

9. Adoption and implementation of the plan. A concrete local action/development plan is the desired outcome of a rural appraisal process. The plan includes priorities identified by the participants, proposed actions, individual and group implementation responsibilities, work schedules, and identification of areas where external assistance is desirable. A sound plan can be useful to influence decision makers.
Example: A Simple Planning Worksheet (Etling, 1995, module E-9)

Objective: ________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>DOES WHAT</th>
<th>BY WHEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(responsibilities)</td>
<td>activities or agenda</td>
<td>deadline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Resources needed: ________________________________

How will this objective be evaluated? When? By Whom? ________________________________

Factors to be considered in this step include:

a. If local people are involved, they are more likely to assist with implementation.

b. Local people and technical advisors should discuss implementation procedures.

c. Individuals or groups that might assist or provide resources should be listed and contacted.

d. A timetable should be established with obtainable goals.

e. Often, training will be needed to produce the desired outcome or action.

f. The responsibility of the community for implementing and monitoring progress toward the action/development plan should be emphasized.

c. Part of the plan might include application to one or more development assistance agencies.

d. Support from district or regional officials should be formally solicited.

11. Identification of areas for further, maybe more in-depth, investigation. While these rural appraisal techniques can be effective in identifying problems and possible solutions, they do not replace the necessity for long-term, in-depth studies of specific problems that are central to a community’s development. The rural appraisal process can help target areas for further study.

Summary

The design of a rural assessment procedure tailored to the local situation and the desired study objectives will require careful attention to the choices of relevant data gathering directions and interview questions. Items relevant to each appraisal can be chosen from the Rural Appraisal Design Kit. The data collection process may need to be adjusted during the rural appraisal to gain increased insight into an unforeseen problem or opportunity. If questions or gaps arise during data gathering or analysis, a repeat visit to gather more data, or a public meeting may be needed to complete the data.

Some recommendations that are important for beginners:
1. Plan and conduct an appraisal using common sense with the end result in mind.

2. Be flexible. Feel free to deviate from your plan when necessary.

3. Be opportunistic; listen to the views of unplanned interviewees when the opportunity arises, but record them as such.

4. Do not be oversold on one technique. Employing additional techniques can verify (or refute) the results of a single technique.

5. Use rural appraisal to complement other efforts. Often, an in-depth study, or studies, will be needed to provide information on certain critical issues.

The value of rural appraisal lies both within the process and the product. The process causes many people to learn much about a given situation and, perhaps, develop teamwork or a helping attitude toward the community. The value of the product is closely related to the skills of the investigators.

With careful planning, rapid appraisal can achieve its potential as a useful method for quickly gaining useful information about a rural community. It can be accomplished by individuals who do not have the time, funds, or expertise needed for a thorough quantitative study. It can be worth much more than the drive-by assessments done by so many outside experts or the recording of prejudices by officials who do not take the time to visit the local people and gather reliable information.

References


