

19. The application of RAP and RRA techniques in emergency relief programmes

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This paper presents still another use for rapid qualitative assessment techniques borrowed from both RAP and RRA: their application to emergency relief programmes. The paper highlights both advantages and difficulties in using RAP and RRA techniques, and suggests how they can be used to complement wider quantitative information systems. They can also be used to start a participatory process that can help people in the affected community to take charge of their own relief, as a vital step in the process of recovery. - Eds.

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER is to look at the application of RAP and RRA techniques in emergency relief programmes and to highlight some of the advantages and some of the difficulties of using these techniques in relief programmes. In so doing, the paper draws on the experience of rural evaluations in food related emergencies in the Horn of Africa, in the recent floods in Bangladesh, and in Afghan and Vietnamese refugee camps.

The state of the art

Various forms of RRA are being increasingly used in the assessment and evaluation of all kinds of emergencies. The idea of the rapid assessment or rapid appraisal of emergency situations is not new. In most situations, the "rush job" is all there is really time for in the first stages of a crisis, and in this context the use of some RRA techniques has proved important.

Similarly, an increasing recognition that the kind of qualitative information that RRA can provide is acceptable and presentable means that RRA and RAP-type surveys are now being used to complement wider information systems in emergencies. The softer data produced by RRA are now being better presented in report form and are increasingly drawn on to fill out more quantitative surveys and to give a fuller living picture of particular areas and particular groups.

However, as RRA and RAP gain credibility as important sources of information in emergencies, experience to date has provided three main lessons.

1. Experience shows that, while RRA techniques are relatively easy to apply in non-emergency situations, their use is not so straightforward in the confusion of relief situations. This means that the RRA most commonly used in current relief practice tends to be a more condensed version and is seldom the stuff of which RRA training workshops are made. In the relief context, the acronym RRA might better refer to "Rough and Ready Appraisal."

2. Although only a handful of techniques are applicable in emergencies, the methods used do provide a valuable insight into conditions within individual households. Such insight, so quickly gained, is unobtainable by any other method.

3. Most quantitative data are aggregated over relatively large areas, such as crop forecasts, nutritional status and rainfall. This kind of information is likely to mask important differences within a region, as not everyone will be equally affected by the emergency. RRA can be used to zoom in on particular areas and groups to identify who has been worst hit and why. It can provide good depth of information but not necessarily good breadth of coverage. It can fine-tune the wider information systems to the actual needs of people. This is the first step towards an effective relief programme.

RRA techniques appropriate to relief operations

In most emergency situations it is not possible to carry out a wide range of RRA techniques or to involve people's participation to the full. In food, flood and refugee emergencies, a combination of pressures make a variety of techniques unworkable. War or civil conflict; acute physical suffering; fear, grief and desperation inevitably limit the number of RRA techniques appropriate to the emergency situation.

While it may be possible for affected people to participate in some basic ranking exercises and in quite detailed interviews, other RRA techniques will be impractical. There is neither the time nor the right atmosphere to introduce or carry out a wide variety of RRA exercises and it is unlikely that the ideal multidisciplinary team will be available. In practice only two main RRA/RAP techniques are practical in emergencies: semi-structured interviewing and direct observation.

Semi-structured interviewing

Semi-structured interviewing involves individual interviews or group discussions with three groups: the affected population; the local authorities; and the local relief staff. Interviewing in emergency situations is often a very different process from interviewing in a less pressurized development context. It tends to require greater sensitivity to people who are often in new and frightening situations and who are not able to speak with the confidence of their normal surroundings.

The first feature of emergency interviewing is the problem of fear, mistrust, trauma and panic. These are ever present and cannot be underestimated. Because of fear or mistrust, people are often forced to say nothing, to play things down, or to exaggerate and lie [1]. Interviews are bound to have a difficult dynamic when they are carried out within a circle of armed guards; or with people who are desperate to secure refugee status; or when they are devastated by a disaster.

The second feature of emergency interviewing is a result of the relief process itself. Relief situations obviously tend to focus on the giving and receiving of critical and life-saving items

like food, shelter and clothing. In their new circumstances people are often totally dependent on these relief items, and interviews can turn from discussions to occasions in which people seek only to lobby and coerce the RRA/RAP team. Distressed people's realization that an interview may have immediate results by releasing more relief items is a constant pressure in emergency interviewing. Discussions that set out to focus on an in-depth exploration of group problems and relief organization can quickly break down into tales of individual tragedy and a series of individual 'shopping lists.' Although much can be learned from these, they are difficult to interrupt and can side-track the group from organizing itself and presenting its case as a whole.

Conditions such as these form the background of many relief situations, and interviews become more difficult and listening becomes a more particular art. It is important to read between the lines on these occasions and a certain amount of 'lateral listening' is usually required [21].

Direct observation and checking

Whatever one hears in interviews should be verified by constant cross checking and direct observation where possible. This should be done by sensitive probing during the interviews and by as much direct observation as possible.

Distribution records should be checked to confirm or deny the testimony of the people and the authorities. Testimony that does not tally with what one is seeing should be looked into more thoroughly. If people are exaggerating, keeping silent or lying, the RRA/RAP team needs to try and work out why and to what extent. However, at all times, it is important to remember that the teams who are interviewing and observing are not always welcome. Often they are a threat to the authorities, to interpreters and to affected people. RRA/RAP teams can compromise these groups by asking the wrong question, quoting their testimony to the wrong person, or being seen to notice the wrong thing. Insensitive action by teams can endanger people and have serious repercussions.

RRA information as a complement to quantitative data

Despite the difficulties of using RRA in relief situations, experience has shown that RRA has a vital function in emergencies. RRA - however rough and ready - serves three main functions in relief situations. First, it produces valuable qualitative information at a grassroots, household level. Second, it is able to work fast. Third, the very method of RRA can start a participatory process that can influence the running of the relief programme and begin to help break down fear and mistrust.

RRA insight at household level

The kind of interviewing and direct observation described above produces useful qualitative information about particular communities and particular circumstances. It is not hard information but provides a more personal insight about the people involved and the nature of their present circumstances.

Household insight provides detail of a kind that gives added depth to quantitative information and sharpens the focus on the picture gained from broader indicators [3]. For example, in food-related emergencies or refugee situations where relief planners are fixing standard food ration sizes, insight into food sharing and food consumption patterns discovered by RRA interviews and observation has clarified needs more precisely and determined general policy. Learning about how people are eating and sharing and how they are supplementing their diet has allowed planners to introduce more appropriate rations [4]. In the same way, after floods or natural disasters, when cash support is urgent for food purchase and house repair, RRA interviews and first-hand observation can provide important information about labour patterns, informal credit practices and details of accommodation preference and house-sharing [unpublished paper, Rural Evaluations June 1990].

Household insight can help in the interpretation of broader indicators at the local level. In most situations where large information systems give blanket definitions of need, the application of RRA helps to make the picture into something more like a patchwork quilt. By providing this focus, RRA is able to represent the ambiguities and particular circumstances of the situation more accurately and thereby complement hard data.

Speed

A second feature of RRA and RAP is their speed. This is a particularly important aspect for emergency relief programmes. Food emergencies can be well hidden and slow to emerge before they erupt or they can be brought about within days by destitution or displacement. Natural disasters or large refugee movements can happen overnight and the consequences can be sudden and disastrous. This means that there is a need for speed in life-threatening relief situations - particularly the needs assessment stage.

Rapid assessment teams may not be able to cover vast areas but they can quickly cover sample areas such as the worst affected areas. One advantage of these surveys is that the information that they produce can be very quickly processed and expressed. Also, they can cover broad issues (food, health, shelter, etc) and is not confined to a single sector or indicator.

RRA participation and community-managed relief

A further important contribution RRA can make in relief situations springs from its ability to start a process of participation and cooperation within the relief programme. If handled sensitively and diplomatically, the very methods of participatory RRA and RAP can start a process of community-managed relief and help to break down fear and mistrust.

The distinctive feature of RRA techniques is that they encourage the active participation of the population at risk. Even in emergencies, RRA techniques are dialogical and participatory. They attempt to hear people's views of recent events, their perceptions of the present situation and their estimations of future conditions. However fragile, the participation involved in the interviewing and discussion phase of RRA emergency assessments is often a good starting point for designing more community-managed relief programmes [5].

The participatory RRA method allows people themselves, their representatives and local authorities, to contribute to the making of the relief agenda. By not being bound to a single discipline, an RRA survey can also allow the relief agenda to become broader and more appropriate to the circumstances of that particular locality. By looking at people's livelihoods within the particular emergency context, RRA is not focused on a single indicator and therefore is not bound to set up a single sector response.

Because of this, more imaginative and more appropriate relief strategies can be developed in consultation with the affected people themselves. An increasing example of this process is that solutions to some food emergencies are no longer discussed purely in terms of food aid. Instead, new non-food options such as cash, livestock support, labour support, and health support are now recognized as more appropriate, and are appearing on the relief agenda.

By introducing people's participation into the relief process from the start, RRA techniques can therefore contribute three important factors to the emergency programme. First, they allow the affected people to be heard and to help in setting the relief agenda. Second, by not being exclusively focused on nutrition, health or agriculture, RRA dialogue allows the relief agenda to be widened to include a variety of relief options. Third, sensitive interviewing and responsible reporting by RRA teams can bring various sides together in an emergency to improve cooperation and build the confidence of the affected community.

Conclusion

The use of RAP and RRA in emergency situations is, and always will be, compromised and unconventional. In some cases where NGOs work alongside vulnerable communities on a day-to-day basis, a more diverse RRA/RAP package can be used to assess problems and work out relief measures in advance. In the majority of rushed jobs however, the emergency scenario remains the same: things happen suddenly, access is intermittent and restricted, and people are often desperate or in fear. In these situations, only a limited package is possible and advisable.

An emergency is not the time to try to use a wide variety of techniques nor is it the time to expect the ideal team. Instead, an emergency is the time to get together with the affected community and its representatives and to listen and look as much as possible. This simple approach can be combined with broader surveys to understand the situation and to acquire details that only direct contact can provide. Added to this, 'rough and ready appraisal' can start a participatory process that can lead to a more community-managed relief programme. People in the affected community can begin to take charge of their own relief and break down some of the problems associated with being the victim. This in itself is always a vital step in the process of recovery.

References

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