

33. Institutionalizing the use of rapid assessment procedures in rural service agencies

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This paper provides a perceptive and prescriptive discussion of RAP from a donor perspective. While RAP is described as an acceptable addition to the "tool kit" of data gathering methods used and endorsed by the World Bank, these methods remain outside the mainstream approaches of many of the Bank's economics-oriented staff. Based on the experience of bringing a new methodology into place within such an institution, the author argues strongly that high level "decision makers" in developing countries must be oriented toward the value of various data gathering tools, including RAP, and that such orientation should occur at an early stage in the programme planning process. The importance of choosing a method that fits the often inflexible "timing" requirements of decision making in planning and resource allocation processes is stressed. This and other papers appear to indicate that, both inside the World Bank and within several of the planning processes that it supports in developing countries, these methods are becoming more common. Eds.

WHILE GREAT STRIDES have been made in refining rapid assessment procedures, these are still used mostly by social scientists in the course of research or special studies. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize that implementing agencies (such as health, agricultural extension, and other government or non-governmental agencies that provide various services to the rural population) will need to integrate rapid assessment procedures into their normal diagnostic, monitoring, and evaluation activities before sustainable, participatory development can occur. This is likely to require profound changes in the concepts and procedures upon which these agencies operate. Development and research institutions should work with the implementing agencies to promote and facilitate this evolution.

Constraints to the institutionalization of rapid assessment procedures

The introduction of rapid assessment methodologies in the work habits of rural service agencies is likely to face four categories of constraints: the usual ones associated with any effort to encourage the circulation of information, those that face any effort to facilitate participatory development, planning and implementation mechanisms that hinder flexibility, and personnel supervision and reward systems that discourage initiative

1. The use of rapid assessment procedures faces the same general constraint of mistrust and over-bureaucratization as any other effort to encourage a flow of information between hierarchical layers and across departments. In agencies where the exchange of data is considered a potential threat to management or a value judgement on the performance of individual staff members,

rather than as constructive feedback on implementation, any attempt to collect and disseminate information will encounter difficulties, whatever the proposed methodology.

2. Methods that elicit opinions, facts and desires from the rural population may entail a sometimes radical shift in institutional culture, especially in how managers and staff view their position in relation to their clients. Activities such as diagnostic studies, rapid assessments of existing practices, open-ended interviews, and group discussions of indigenous knowledge and beliefs, all implicitly recognize that the rural people hold knowledge and information of value to the agency that is providing services to them. The converse is also true: the implication is that the highly educated professionals and managers of these agencies do not know all the answers. Indeed, the problem may be that they have not yet found out what the real questions are. This de facto bottom-up flow of information involves a level of participation of the people concerned that goes against established patterns in centralized agencies.

3. The very purpose for which these methods are used entails some radical changes in the way programmes are planned, implemented, and evaluated. From a rigid set-up, in which objectives and strategies are formulated at the central level, together with a detailed "blueprint" work programme, to be followed with little modification, an attempt is made to shift to an iterative learning process, in which diverse methods are used to identify what the people are doing, why, and what their behaviour is in response to the services made available to them. This implies the acceptance, before the fact, that the work programme, the implementation strategy, and indeed the objectives themselves, may need to be revised on the basis of experience.

Such a process calls for a degree of flexibility in planning and management unlikely to exist in highly centralized, top-down management structures, and is difficult to put into effect in agencies with uncertain resources and unreliable communications. Indeed, it may be difficult to accept by the very development agencies recommending the use of rapid assessment methods.

4. Flexibility and iteration in planning require changes in staff supervision and performance evaluation. Obedient implementation of a programme as authorized becomes less important than good observation skills, the ability to bring to light the reasons behind people's behaviour, and the capacity to question whether the logic behind the programme design, calendar, and strategies remains valid. This is difficult to achieve in highly centralized management systems, and may require a level of planning and managerial skills not always readily available in rural service agencies.

The need for support from senior management

A key lesson from World Bank experience is that such shifts cannot take place without the full understanding and active support of senior management in implementing agencies over a long period of time. Because of its fundamental concern that all investment projects contribute to the long-term improvement of management practices, the Bank considers that the measures to strengthen the capacity of the implementing institutions to monitor and evaluate their own activities should be planned for all Bank loans.

The Bank, as well as many other development institutions, emphasizes that a good monitoring system cannot be limited to financial and physical data on programme implementation. It must cover quantitative and qualitative evidence of the awareness and use of the available services by the intended beneficiaries and other rural people, together with selective evaluations of the resulting changes in productivity, income, or health status.

Managers and technical directors need answers on a regular basis to such key questions as:

1. Are the people aware of the availability of the service?
2. Do they take advantage of it?
3. Who does and who does not, and how does this compare with the intended beneficiaries?
4. What are the reasons (social, economic, technical, environmental or other) that explain their behaviour?
5. What does all of this mean for our programme?

However, to obtain and utilize such information on a periodic basis, and whenever necessary to quickly undertake a diagnostic study or a beneficiary assessment, the managers and technical staff in service agencies need to be familiar with qualitative, explanatory methodologies.

Answers to the type of questions outlined above cannot be provided through rigid surveys, but may require the use of open-ended interviews, group and community interviews, systematic assessments of existing knowledge, attitude and practices and beneficiary assessments through participant-observation [1].

For the long-term, data collection activities that answer such questions encourage an increase in the people's involvement in programme implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The same effort is also necessary to encourage their increased participation in programme identification and design.

Steps required to alleviate these constraints

1. The bank has found that the first stage in building up the capacity of a service agency to make good use of whatever rapid assessment methods may be appropriate to its information needs is to work with its senior managers and technical managers, to ensure that they share the same understanding of information as a constructive management tool and not as a threat or judgement on individual performance.
2. The next step is to help these managers identify their information needs for programme planning and design, or for monitoring implementation progress and the people's utilization of the services provided. At that time, they should be introduced to the key methodologies that may be used to fill these needs quickly and efficiently.
3. It is only after this common concept is established, and a demand for constructive information has been created, that it becomes worthwhile to provide in-depth methodological training to technical and para-professional staff.

The Africa Region of the Bank is making a major effort to help agricultural extension agencies strengthen their capacity to provide services appropriate to farmers' needs in an efficient manner. As part of this effort, the Bank co-sponsors, with groups of borrowers from neighbouring countries, a series of two workshops one year apart, in which each participatory agency is represented by a team including its most senior extension officials as well as the person(s) in charge of coordinating monitoring and evaluation activities for the agency [2, 3]. In parallel with these "training" activities, we have found that our own project officers must share the same understanding and show interest in and support of this effort throughout project preparation, appraisal, supervision and evaluations. We are therefore providing training and ongoing technical advice to our own staff along these lines.

Conclusion

The integration of rapid assessment procedures into the "toolkit" used by rural services agencies will be a difficult, slow process, but it is essential to sustainable development. It is a timely effort, that complements the increased attention given to popular participation.

The role of development agencies

Development agencies can play an important role in reaching this objective through their own actions, by showing that they give weight to the people's behaviour and rationale, and therefore to methodologies that provide a better understanding of human behaviour [4]. To succeed, they should not limit their role to providing technical support to practitioners, but rather to promote better understanding among rural service managers of the benefits their own agencies would derive from a systematic utilization of rapid assessment procedures on a sustainable basis.

References

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COMMENT:

The use of RAP appears to focus on information needs by project leaders. But there are also

higher levels of decision makers. What in the "tool box" of methods is most useful for these higher cadres?

COMMENT:

The agencies must first focus on what are the key information needs of top decision makers for management and resource allocation. Then we ask what are the optimal tools for gathering the information and what are the tools that will give you information with sufficient precision and within the proper time frame.

COMMENT:

The "Murphy paradigm" states that information should be good enough and soon enough: "Good enough to use for what you need to do with it and soon enough so it is available when decisions must be made."

COMMENT:

Institutions concerned with development assistance should encourage local institutions to coordinate and undertake whatever research is needed. There is concern that foreign research teams work in a country and then leave, without building capacity. The decision on types of research and major information needs should be done by the national decision makers in cooperation with their technical staff and with their superiors. The technical staff in charge of evaluation and planning efforts of this type should make the decisions on what type of methods should be used, in what form and in what time frame. They should also consider how to package results so that it will be clear and useful to the decision makers.