

## **41. Rapid assessment methodologies: A conference summary**

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**The conference summary was presented at the closing session of the conference, having been prepared "rapidly" by Ngokwey Ndolamb. This summary captured both the spirit of the conference and its major points. Participants were reminded that they had heard and discussed a wide range of methodologies within a context that was almost totally operational and problem oriented. He emphasizes that despite the great pluralism in these methods, almost all were developing in the context of real problems and real programmes for real people. He cautions correctly about the gaps between technique and results, methods and theory, and knowledge gained through these methods and its application. The greatest challenges will remain those of institutionalizing RAP within development agencies and academia, developing stronger mechanisms for quality control in training and use, and in developing effective strategies and mechanisms to assure that what is learned through rapid assessment methodologies is well used. - Eds.**

THE RICHNESS OF presentations and the intensity of discussions make it difficult to attempt any meaningful summary of this four-day conference. The diversity of participants and of expectations also compounds this difficulty. Indeed, apart from the multiplicity of disciplinary backgrounds (social sciences, health sciences, agricultural sciences, etc.) and professional interests (academics, development planners, programme officers, etc.), there is also a diversity of expectations: some came to exchange ideas about their experience with rapid methodologies, others came to learn about these methodologies; some came to discuss about rapid assessments or rapid appraisals as methods or techniques of data collection and analysis; others came to present the results of their use of these methodologies. This diversity of expectations is well illustrated by one participant who asked: "Is this a method-oriented or a problem-oriented conference?"

The methodology itself is named diversely: rapid assessment procedures, rapid rural appraisals, participatory rural appraisals, rapid ethnographic procedures, etc. The acronym RAP, standing for rapid assessment procedures, was reinterpreted differently to capture what different participants considered the essence of the methodology. "R" as relevant, relaxed, relatively rapid, responsible, role reversals. "A" as anthropological, appraisal, assessment, action. "P" as participatory, procedures, practice, etc. The diversity of participants and expectations partly accounts for discussions around the specificity of rapid assessment methodologies. One could hear questions or comments like: "Is this RAP? What is RAP about this? This is not RAP! Is not RAP just another name for operations research? What is new? This has been done already! What is ethnographic about this? This is a standard method...etc."

These questions and comments illustrate diverging views of these methodologies. For the sake of simplification, we may distinguish a restricted view and an extended one. The restricted view, claiming scientific basis, considers RAP as a set of well-defined techniques; the extended view

on the other hand considers RAP as an approach, even an attitude, and focuses on whatever characteristics it chooses to. Proponents of the restricted view of RAP set clear-cut standards in determining what is or is not RAP. They are afraid that if anything can be RAP, the whole methodology might be discredited. Proponents of the extended view tend to suggest that RAP is many things to many people and that what is important is not so much the conformity to a particular set of techniques, but rather the conformity to a general participatory methodology. Needless to say, although these two views are presented here as dichotomous, in fact, they are just two endpoints of a continuum.

### **Diversity within unity**

One of the most striking characteristics of qualitative methodologies revealed by this conference is their diversify within a coherent unity. Indeed, whatever phrases are used to name these methodologies, whatever terms are used for the acronym RAP, or whatever views are adopted (restricted or extended), most participants would agree at least on the following basic premises of these methodologies: the participatory approach, methodological pluralism, and action-orientation.

The participatory approach is at the heart of these methodologies; not only the traditional participant observation of anthropologists, but the actual involvement of the community members themselves in the process of data gathering, analysis, or project design in order to correct the common bias of development ventriloquism when so-called experts speak for community members.

Methodological pluralism is both internal and external. Internally, it refers to a combination and convergence of methods and techniques, very often with synergetic effects. Externally, it is an acknowledgment of other methodologies, of the fact that RAP techniques are not a panacea, that they are just one more tool in the tool box, that we should thus not consider everything a nail just because we have a hammer.

Action-orientation is the third premise, referring to the imperative of practical application of knowledge obtained through these methodologies. RAP is not only a technique or method for data gathering and analysis. It is also a catalyst for intervention, and can itself be an intervention, through consensus or commitment building or in establishing rapport. From the beginning of any RAP study, there should be a commitment to use the findings, or to take action on the problems identified. The example of the Yanomani Indians, one of the most studied people in the world who do not benefit from these studies was cited.

From these three premises result most of the principles of RAP. Many examples of the use and usefulness of these premises were given. Examples of mapping, seasonal analysis, ranking, and scoring by community members in India [1] were illustrative of the potentialities of the participatory approach, the idea being to "learn from and with rural people."

The papers presented during the conference are a good illustration of the explosive growth and diversification of rapid assessment procedures mentioned by Cernea, especially with regard to use in various sectors and subsectors: health, nutrition, water and sanitation, rural development,

urban services. Topics ranged from coping response to AIDS to apparent food consumption, from risk assessment of schistosomiasis to hunger eradication programmes, from high risk behaviour among long distance truck drivers to human water contacts, watershed management, forestry and credit.

The papers presented experiences and data from over 20 countries, a sample of the tremendous geographical broadening of rapid assessment methodologies. These methodologies, as one participant put it, know no boundaries. Indeed, they have been used in the United Kingdom in health [2] and in Switzerland and Australia in agriculture.

### **Constraints and difficulties**

Difficulties encountered in the use of RAP or of its results were discussed. Some are institutional, others methodological or ideological. Institutional difficulties have to do with training, reward mechanisms, top-down bureaucratic planning methods, and the macro-level nature of national policies and programmes. As Watson [31] notes for this last issue, "in its focus on in-depth analysis of problems perceived by particular communities, the RAP methodology leaves many seeking to conceptualize and implement national programmes asking about its relevance to them."

Similarly, the sensitivity of the RAP approach to culture and cultural diversity may be at times incompatible with political efforts at nation-building, which often tend to ignore the cultural specificities, or in any case do not consider them in national planning, even though regional planning is an accepted strategy in national development. Methodological difficulties include among others the balance between quantitative techniques and qualitative appraisals and the issue of the rapidity of the methodology. In conformity with the methodological pluralism that characterizes RAP, there was a consensus on the "complementary use of qualitative assessment and quantitative survey methods for programme planning and evaluation" [4]. This complementarity between the "quantified bones of the survey with the qualitative flesh of rapid assessment" [5] was compared by one participant to the paradigm of ying and yang, where "qualitative is yang, feminine and soft like the moon; and quantitative is ying, masculine and strong, like the sun." Another participant noted that qualitative results are the "flavouring of quantitative results."

On the issue of the rapidity of the methodology, there was a general agreement that RAP is indeed more rapid than traditional anthropological fieldwork or some highly formalized survey methods, and that "the more you RAP, the faster you RAP." However, it was also noted that, in fact, RAP can be long, especially if one considers the initial time put in preparing the assessments or the needed background knowledge and experience with the communities being studied. The issue is then to know when rapid is too rapid or not slow enough for the data must not only be "soon enough, but also good enough" [6]. Rapid but relaxed was the title of one of the presentations. This idea is well captured by the Latin saying, "festina lente" (rush slowly)!

There are also ideological obstacles, mainly related to attitudes of development planners or experts who still "do not take people seriously, "do not" put people first" [7].

## Three gaps

Three main gaps in the use of these methodologies and of the results can be distinguished. There is first the gap between techniques and results. Some presentations focused on the techniques themselves, describing the particular combination of methods used, while others insisted on the results, subsuming the uniqueness of RAP in obtaining them. Not enough presentations explored both the techniques and the results as well as the links between the two. This gap between techniques and the results is partly related to the issue of the main conference focus itself, which, as noted previously, led one participant to ask: "Is this a method or a problem-oriented conference?"

The second gap is the one between method and theory. There is indeed the danger that an excessive focus on methods and techniques will slight the theoretical dimensions of this approach. Yet, the method itself is related implicitly or explicitly to theory, be it the theory of the specific sectors or aspects being investigated (farming systems, health seeking behaviour, sociocultural change, etc.) or the theory of the method itself (e.g. theories of group dynamics for focus group discussions, ethnoscience or cognitive anthropology for mapping, sampling theory for sampling, etc.). Without a sound theoretical basis, rapid assessment methodologies may not gain much credibility in the academic world; more importantly, they may not contribute to theory-building or to an effective "re-tooling in applied social investigation for development planning" [8] both of which have theoretical and epistemological conditions.

Theory, it seems, is unavoidable. There are no techniques without methodology, no methodology without theoretical orientation, and probably no theory without an ideological bias. It is true that not all RAP practitioners need to have a theoretical knowledge of the techniques they are using. In the same vein, one needs not know theory of electricity before turning on the light. However, it seems reasonable to expect that trainers of trainers, for example, will need to be more conscious of the theoretical background, underpinnings and implications of what they are doing. If there are acceptable levels of theoretical ignorance for some, a total theoretical nonchalance under the pretense of methodological purism is misleading at best.

There is also a gap between the knowledge accumulated and its application. In spite of the fundamental action-orientation of these methodologies, it is not always clear how the results are used or can be used. "So what?" is the ever-present question when it seems that knowledge is not being translated into action. It is not sufficient to know that pregnant women think that taking iron tablets will result in overweight babies and complicated deliveries. The issue is not to put the knowledge to use in MCH services. Similarly, the issue is not to determine whether or not the peasants have cognitive or analytical skills, but rather to use their skills in community development programmes. After all, one participant asked, "What is knowledge if it cannot be replicated either in theory or in action?"

Health education seems to be one of the main areas of application of rapid assessment methodologies in health. Although this shows that it is possible to narrow the gap between knowledge and application, the long-term nature of health education and the limited results of most health education programmes raise some questions. More importantly, conventional health

education, as a strategy of teaching people what is good for them seems at times incompatible with the participatory approach which focuses on learning from the people.

## **Institutionalizing RAP**

This conference has also raised the issue of the institutionalization of RAP. Institutionalization is a long-term process involving various actors at different levels and various actions. The actors include not only community members themselves, but also the intermediary cadres, the service providers and the top leaders, the decision-makers and the decision-takers. It is particularly important not to ignore the leaders who make decisions on priorities and resource allocation.

It is important to know their information needs and the types of decisions they have to make in order to be able to advise them on the relevance of RAP in policy formulation or programme planning. These actors could be either with governments, public administrations, development agencies, private voluntary organizations, etc.

Among the actions needed for the institutionalization of RAP, the application of results is certainly one of the most important, not only because it is intrinsic in the methodology itself, but also because the relevance of RAP and of RAP results can be a key element in the institutional adoption of these methodologies. Another critical action is the sensitization and information of all members concerned, decision-makers, service providers, community members, etc. Each one of these categories needs to have an understanding of the perspectives and constraints of the others. Central to the institutionalization of RAP is training; training in health or agricultural institutions, training of health personnel, and training of community agents. Even anthropologists themselves could benefit from training in rapid assessment procedures, even though these procedures are largely based on anthropological techniques. Training should also aim at developing local level expertise. In fact, capacity building should be imperative whenever foreign researchers are involved in developing countries. In this context, training of trainers becomes urgent.

The establishment and exploitation of networks of RAP researchers and users is also important for the diffusion of techniques and results, and for information and experience sharing. Effective communication of research results needs to be promoted.

For its institutionalization, RAP needs to become an integral part of the programming process, in all its phases: situation analysis, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

As I pointed out at the beginning, no summary can do justice to this rich and successful conference. I have indicated some of the key issues that were discussed as well as some thoughts on these issues, especially with regard to the methodological pluralism, the participatory approach and the action-orientation which are the specificity of RAP methodology. Some of the difficulties, constraints and gaps in the application of these methods and/or of their results were discussed. Actors involved in and actions needed for the institutionalization of RAP were also examined. If this conference has helped us "to analyze critically our new tools, their strengths and weaknesses, with warm hearts and cold heads" [8]; if it has helped us establish "rapport" among various qualitative methodologies; if it has helped us adopt an attitude of humility, a

greater sensibility to culture in development, a greater respect of people, and methodological pluralism; if this conference has drawn our attention to the conceptual load of the techniques we are using; if this conference has helped us consider that whatever we gather and analyse, we must try to apply, then it will have succeeded. For after all, "what is knowledge if it cannot be replicated either theoretically or practically?"

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