

Section V: Training for RAP and other qualitative methods

Section introduction

37. Synopsis of the training panel from the international conference on rapid assessment procedures for planning and evaluating health and nutrition programmes

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The RAP conference devoted a full session to issues related to training. The major issues discussed centred on, "Who can be trained to use RAP; how should training be organized and conducted; and could the current RAP training be less fragmented and better organized." While there were no papers presented specifically on training, there was a lively discussion. The highlights of this discussion are provided on the following pages. However, because training issues were raised at each conference session, often in the context of other topics, the main issues are summarized in this introduction.

Mainly through previous conference presentations, and as illustrated in this volume by several of the authors, RAP training of one type or another has become diverse. It ranges from the well-developed national and regional workshops organized by the United Nations University mainly for anthropologists with an interest in health and nutrition, to orientation sessions for staff of the World Bank and UNICEF organized by proponents within those organizations. For consideration also are training of donor programme officers and government officials who participate in qualitative data gathering at neighbourhood and village levels.

The training of national level personnel by those who have participated in UNU-type RAP workshops often is guided by the RAP Guidelines and training materials published by the UNU. There are a variety of other training aids for RAP in specific topic areas. There are also a set of papers and less official guides on a wide variety of RRA methods available through the International Institute for Environment and Development, London.

However, while the majority of participants at the RAP conference agreed that more training was needed, there was no effort made to improve available materials in RAP and RRA or to generate agreement that training sponsored by the variety of organizations represented should be mutually reinforcing by better coordination. Indeed, even the training materials which were noted are not available in one place. Activities by the IIED, the UNU, and the IDRC had begun to alleviate these problems by the end of 1991 and a major effort to better coordinate training and improve materials was planned for 1992.

The issue of "insiders" and "outsiders" was also raised in this session, not only in terms of the perspective from which to view a community but also from evolution of the technique. The original developers of RAP were outsiders trying to acquire an insider's perspective. However, others attempting to use the qualitative participatory techniques embodied in what is now identified as RAP methodology involved community insiders in the actual collection of data. This is particularly true of those who developed what is now identified as RRA.

Another issue discussed was that of the "level" of training required of those who would actually use RAP in the community. Many of those who had attended RAP training saw their role as primarily that of organizing and training field workers strongly familiar with a given community and culture to do the actual data gathering. In RRA, method training was seen as ultimately belonging to the community, with people taking an active and pro-active role analyzing their problems, assessing behaviours, and planning development projects appropriate to their resources and needs. Far from this perspective, other conference participants argued that the most appropriate domain for practical RAP studies was with marketing specialists.

None of these issues was resolved at the conference. Several points however, were raised in either formal and informal sessions which are worthy of note:

1. RAP training should be multilevel.
2. While social science training, particularly with a specialty in anthropology, is useful when training is to be directed toward community level data gathering and analysis, others trained in a relatively wide range of disciplines have made excellent use of RAP.
3. The planning, monitoring and evaluation staff of international and bilateral donors, foundations and national level programme evaluation groups need first to be oriented in the roles of qualitative methods and major techniques, and a subset of such staff should receive at least introductory training in RAP and RRA.
4. While it is neither necessary nor desirable to standardize orientation and training in RAP, the major developers and users of these qualitative methods need to form a joint working group whose function it would be to draw together orientation and training resources and see to it that they are shared.
5. With a few notable institutional exceptions academia appears to be significantly behind the professional field and donors in contributions to the development and use of Rapid Assessment Methodologies and RRA.
6. Training in the use of RAP-type skills at higher organizational levels inside and outside of government for purposes of gathering information for problem identification, programme planning and for development of advocacy strategies is needed and as yet poorly developed. Current tendencies are to informally use a few of the basic principles found within RAP. (RAP is now too often used to "legitimize" what is often referred to as "development tourism.")

In short, RAP training, while expanding in diversity and levels of "students," is an area that needs systematic analysis and strategic thinking at the highest levels. RAP training may well be the focus of the next international conference dealing with qualitative research for health and nutrition.