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# Revolutionary rural appraisal?

**Susan Johnson**

Recent editions (RRA Notes 9 and 10) of RRA notes have contained pieces by RRA practitioners concerned with "being there" - the impact and how to explain it. I am not aware that there is a right answer to these questions, just some more honest answers than others. Rather, I would like to comment on the context of those questions.

Scheuermeier asked (RRA Notes 10) how to explain his presence to the "lady sitting in front of her house". It is indeed the question that makes you squirm inside - you may be there because you like the travelling, like the scenery or whatever, but is that really the question the old lady is asking? If it wasn't you there it would probably be somebody else - so the issue concerns what you represent since you are not usually representing yourself. This is not a problem that is peculiar to RRA practitioners, but it seems to me that there should be a difference in the RRA answer.

RRA techniques tend in these pages to be treated as tools without much in the way of a political context. My understanding of RRA is that these techniques are not simply designed in order to result in projects which are more responsive to the needs, values and beliefs of a community. RRA also provides something of a process approach to that project which enables

the community to become more self-aware in relation to "outside" assistance. This is because the techniques do not just use the community as a database but put it in a position of power by recognising that without its knowledge and participation the project is dead.

So let us be aware of what this approach is. The approach is practiced in a paternalistic framework - nobody asked the old lady if she wanted you there. You are doing it this way because you believe that it is better than what someone else might do. You would prefer it if she had invited you - she didn't - someone else did. Our hope is that because of the process employed she will understand in the future that she is in a position to say "No" until she gets what she wants or agrees with (rather than just to act No - the reason why other projects failed) because through the process she has learnt that she is in a position of power. That is my understanding of the goal - perhaps we should call it Revolutionary Rural Appraisal don't tell the Boss.

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