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RRA training in a UK-based rural development course

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• Introduction

For a number of years, we have been using IIED's Rahimabad simulation and Robert Chambers' presentations to teach RRA on our three month course on *Rural Research and Rural Policy* at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The popularity of these components, which will already be familiar to many readers, encouraged us to add two new exercises to the most recent course:

- a Rapid Rural Appraisal of IDS; and,
- a farm study, using RRA methods.

The course is residential and intensive. There are approximately six hours of contact time each day, five days a week. We attract upwards of 20 study fellows, drawn predominantly from Third World countries, and from a range of government, academic and NGO backgrounds. The majority are men, although the proportion of women has tended to increase through the years. Many are leaving their own countries for the first time and have relatively little idea what to expect when they arrive.

• The Rapid Rural Appraisal of IDS

The first of the two exercises, which involved an investigation of the IDS itself, used RRA to help people find their feet. Gaining some familiarity with the techniques was treated as of secondary importance. It required half a day during the introductory week. I ran it mainly by myself, with some help from a course assistant, acting as a 'village guide', and from various members of IDS staff, who made themselves available for short periods in different capacities.

Following a brief introduction to the techniques to be used, participants were divided into five groups, and each set a single task:

- One group were taken on a transect of the building, which allowed them to identify and locate facilities, and to stop and have short conversations with a range of different Institute members. With the transect complete, they were then able to prepare a map which identified the broad types of work being carried out within the Institute, and the places where different programmes had their offices.
- Another group consulted a series of annual reports running back to the founding of IDS in 1966 to build a historical time line and convey a preliminary sense of how the Institute's work had evolved.
- Two other groups looked in more detail at recent documents dealing respectively with the IDS's research and its programme of operational activities, before constructing charts showing what the fellowship had been working on in various geographical regions (this, among other things, led to the embarrassing discovery that we were currently doing nothing for Nigeria - a country from which four of our participants were drawn).
- The final group used a combination of annual reports and myself, as a key informant, to draw a Venn diagram identifying the different groups within the Institute and the relationship between them.

Some of the tasks inevitably took rather longer to complete than others, but this problem was

overcome by re-assigning those who finished early to help others who needed more time. The morning culminated in a 'village meeting' where the charts and diagrams which had been produced were presented in the plenary, Robert Chambers playing an old and knowledgeable community member. Feedback was also provided by Ros Eyben, who happened to be visiting from the ODA, and who slipped naturally into the role of local bank manager, taking us to task for saying nothing about how the 'village' was financed.

Certain parts of the RRA worked better than others, but each of the individual exercises produced at least some useful insights. Taken as a whole, the morning helped people to establish themselves at the IDS more rapidly than would otherwise have been the case; making them aware of what was going on, and enabling them subsequently to approach members of staff working on subjects of mutual interest. At the same time we were able to lay foundations for the small group work which was to feature prominently throughout the course, as well as providing a preliminary grounding in RRA itself. Other possibilities which might have been exploited could have included seasonal calendars (perhaps to explain why Fellows never seem to be there when students need them most); and an extension of scope to take in other parts of the campus, or possibly even certain aspects of life in the town.

With minor modifications, there is little reason why what we did should not work just as well anywhere else.

• **The farm study**

A short time after the course had begun, some of the participants approached me to see if a visit to a farm could be arranged. This had been a feature of previous courses, when it had been used as an opportunity to explore farming systems research methods. On this occasion, encouraged by the earlier experience, it was decided to attempt an RRA instead.

Personal contacts were used to set things up with a farm a short distance from the University. This was a small enterprise struggling to survive by combining sheep and poultry rearing with a second hand timber

business, an egg delivery round, and the provision of services such as fencing and ploughing to other farms. In some ways, it was therefore not too dissimilar from the kinds of family operations which course participants would encounter in their own countries. The key difference was that the farmer virtually ran everything by himself, only calling in additional help from time to time. With livestock interviewing techniques still in their infancy, this posed the problem of finding sufficient informants for 20 study fellows to work with. The solution was to recruit the farmer and his main part-time worker, and to split into two parties of ten, which then visited the farm on two different days. Both, in turn, were then sub-divided into two groups, each of which worked for half a day with one informant, before switching around in the middle.

A brief orientation of the methods to be used was given on the days before the visits, but most learning took place as we proceeded. Most of the individual exercises were conducted almost exactly as they would be in a Third World village. They included:

- a transect across the farm to explore the relationship between elevation, soil type, land use, problems and possible actions;
- a participatory mapping exercise, which yielded unexpected revelations about the history of the farm and of land use in the surrounding area;
- matrix ranking of the fields beyond his own farm that the farmer was able to use, leading on to the preparation of maps and seasonal calendars;
- a map of the external fields, which then triggered discussions about the seasonal movements of sheep and the circumstances of the owners which led to their land being available in the first place;
- the preparation of a seasonal calendar, relating work load to the life-cycle of livestock and indicating disease patterns;
- matrix ranking of the different income generating activities undertaken on the farm;

- production flow charts for sheep rearing; and,
- the preparation of a time line dealing with all of the major developments taking place in the operation of the farm over the last 30 years; from this trend diagrams were generated, showing how income from different sources had fluctuated, and how the portfolio of activities had been periodically re-shuffled in response.

Unfortunately, since this was an unscheduled activity, which had to be fitted into weekends, there was no time to tidy up charts and put them together for a village meeting. This would clearly have added a further element of realism and provided further opportunities to build skills, and on another occasion I would certainly have tried to find time for it. It would also be good to explore other techniques such as daily time use charts, and to try to involve the farmer's wife, in order to get a woman's perspective on what was going on.

We were perhaps fortunate to have such a suitable farm available in reasonable proximity to the University, but similar opportunities probably exist in most areas if a little time is taken to seek them out. Our experience suggests that, just like villagers in the Third World, farmers enjoy taking part in an RRA, although we felt it was appropriate to offer a fee, which bore some relation to the time expended. Taking this into account, and including buffet lunches and the hire of mini-buses for the two days (but excluding the cost of my own time), the total cost amounted to approximately £360, or £18 per participant per day.

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