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RRA training in a US masters programme: the director's view

Stephen Howard

We have recently been trying to respond to the requests of our students in Masters level programmes to offer more practical skills or applied social science techniques as part of the curriculum. I have been staging in-class RRA training sessions for a couple of years, and then, last year, I had the idea that we should use the University's region to take this course into the field - Ohio, the foothills of Appalachia and one of the poorest regions of the United States.

I contacted a local social service agency about possible sites for RRA training and through a long process found two small communities about 70 kilometres north of here with some typical rural poverty and development problems (in the US context). Community leaders encouraged me to bring the students up to explore their towns and so we did - arranging for a weekend's worth of Rapid Rural Appraisal. These field sessions were preceded by a day-long seminar in which we reviewed techniques and problems of working in interdisciplinary teams.

Each student was assigned to research the issues surrounding one of the following four areas:

- Women and the ageing;
- The environment;
- Economic development; and,
- Education/information.

The multidisciplinary teams met and researched one of the two communities independently and then the following week we went to the field. In the two towns the students met with residents, talked with business people, community leaders and so on. Some tried to seek out the 'silent' members of the community: the aged, children, the

illiterate etc. and met with some success. Each team then returned to Athens where reports were written up and forwarded to the communities. Interestingly, many of the reports were excellent but there was always the problem of getting away from excruciating academic prose.

My idea here was to introduce an important rural development research technique and to give students some experience in the field to place next to their academic course work here. As much as I have read about RRA, there still do not seem to be many opportunities for training individuals to use the technique except 'on the job'.

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