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Urban management training, action learning and rapid analysis methods

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· Background

This short note is an attempt to condense some of the experience gained at the Development Administration Group (DAG) in using Rapid Analysis Methods in an overall action learning approach to urban management training. This has primarily taken place in a series of courses run by DAG and the Town and Country Planning Organisation (TCPO) in the Ministry of Urban Development, New Delhi, India. These notes are only my observations as one of the team members; a considerable amount of the expertise has been built up collectively both by the members of the SPP teams and the course participants. Other members of the team might have different interpretations. The notes reflect on what we have been trying to achieve and the extent to which ideas about RRA can be transferred to the urban context and used in training programmes for government officials.

· What is the problem?

It may help at this stage if I outline the main concern of the various urban management training programmes that we are collaborating with. At the risk of over-simplification, a considerable number of the training programmes at DAG are attempts to overcome institutional inertia and create 'room for manoeuvre' for officers to employ new skills. Within DAG we have tried, in both the urban and rural spheres, to use an action learning approach to achieve this in public administration training. A critical aspect has been forming courses into teams to analyse a problem and produce a report in a 'consultancy' manner. (The term consultancy is not being used in a pejorative way, but to emphasise the importance and necessity of short and quick problem-solving and applied research often carried out in teams). Practically this takes the form of an applied field study. It is critically important to understand that this is not simply a 'look and see'. For officials, it involves them in actually analysing a particular problem in depth and producing practical and detailed policy recommendations.

In training terms the process is more important than the context. The aim of this methodology is to enhance problem-solving ability; namely the ability to identify, diagnose and produce recommendations for a particular issue or problem. For those familiar with an academic research tradition it is easy to underestimate the change in attitudes and behaviour this represents to the general milieu of a government bureaucracy. This weakness in problem analysis has recently been identified as a central concern in the need to strengthen indigenous policy making capacity. This is critically important as it allows policy to be set at the appropriate level rather than be externally set either by donors or, in the case of local government, by national institutions.

In the DAG training courses we have modified the approach of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) to help facilitate this training objective. The emphasis has been on the rapid and reasonably reliable aspects of RRA as a tool in data collection. Recognising the need to be roughly right rather than precise in management decisions has been a guiding theme. In this our approach has been more associated with the rapid nature of these techniques than the participatory emphasis. In the Indian context it has been necessary in order to move officials away from a dependence upon government

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statistics, large scale surveys and formal methodology[1]. Such information is often in fact not available and its absence serves as an excuse for inaction.

In a very real sense the training is an attempt to empower officers to go out and collect raw data, to analyse and to act on their analysis. It is also an attempt to facilitate a process through which government officers go and find out for themselves what is happening on the ground rather than rely on secondary sources and/or official stereotyping. This is of course entirely consistent with, and is the central objective of, an action learning approach to training. In summary it is this desire which has led us to borrow RRA methods, rather than any commitment to them *per se*.

· Recent experience with RRA in an urban context[2]

We have used RRA techniques explicitly in our Indian urban training programmes since 1989. These programmes have generally consisted of a two to three month course in the UK (at Birmingham) on Urban Management followed by a month long field study of a particular urban issue conducted with TCPO. Thus while the Birmingham-based component is intended to acquaint the participants with policy approaches, analytical skills and management methods derived from international experience, the month long Indian component is designed to enable participants to apply these approaches to practical problems in India.

During the UK component, we carry out a field study usually around some issue of local authorities' performance using similar techniques; recent field studies have been carried out in Newcastle, Sheffield and Bradford. This is important as it counters the popular notion that rapid methods are a 'second best' solution for the developing world.

The India component generally involves a two week field study of a particular urban problem in a specific setting. Since 1989 this has involved field studies in small towns in Gujarat, Karnataka and Rajastan. To achieve this the group work towards mutually defined terms of reference, as would a consultancy team. This will involve interviewing, observation and data collection. Then the team returns to TCPO in New Delhi and prepares a report. At the end of the fourth week this is presented to a panel of senior officials and experts from the Ministry of Urban Development. It hardly needs mentioning that this is a hectic but ultimately rewarding process.

The two components of RRA that we have found the most relevant and appropriate, apart from the overall philosophy, are triangulation and the use of proxies.

Triangulation

Triangulation is really the most straightforward of ideas: one should endeavour to check facts from more than one source. In practice this often means checking with another source to verify the accuracy of some official statement. For example an official may state that the government is providing a certain facility. However, in reality it may only be doing so to a very limited extent. In a small town in Karnataka we were assured that informal traders whose sites would be removed/relocated would be compensated. A quick discussion in the field quickly cast considerable doubt on this. Triangulation is particularly important to counter the 'official view'. For government officials it may be considered improper and indeed counter-productive to bypass the official channels and structures. Hence the importance of exposing them to triangulation so as to supplement the official interpretation. For government officers on a government programme, it is simply impossible to become an outsider and escape the government label as much of the literature implies. We all come with our baggage; it is simply untrue and misleading to imagine otherwise.

Use of proxies

The second tool we have borrowed from RRA is the use of proxies. A proxy is an indicator which can give you an idea about a variable

[1] At this stage it may be relevant to note that urban officials often come from technical (e.g. engineering, planning and architecture) backgrounds, which professionally have a relied on large data sets and formal survey methods.

[2] Many of these methods have been documented in a manual entitled *RADIC: A Guide to the Rapid Analysis of Development in Cities.* (Blore, 1994), School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham. [Draft].

Source: RRA Notes (1994), Issue 21, pp.13–16, IIED London

which it is difficult, for whatever reason (money, time or privacy), to measure. These seem particularly useful in relation to poverty and processes of economic development.

Here we use the idea of a proxy as a key indicator to find our way through the enormous quantities of data which exist even for small towns in India! In our 1990 analysis of four small towns in Karnataka on the Bangalore/Mysore corridor, as part of the IDSMT programme (see below), we developed a whole series of proxies to try to understand the processes of local economic development and municipal efficiency. The idea was to find a single proxy which could give us a handle on the potential for local economic development. (In a short period of time it is not possible to assess the local economy, even if a common methodology could be agreed). Data was collected on a whole series of indicators related to the municipalities and the local economy. For example, on the economy we collected data on land prices, employment levels, number of shops, sales tax, number of bank deposits and loans, industry employment and turnover, wage levels, rents, markets and so on.

As can be seen, some of this was simply collecting official statistics at the local level; this often involved manually disaggregating and restructuring official data. This is a more useful and rapid technique than it often appears and officials think. In some cases the data collection involved direct observation. An important lesson was that it is only through doing the exercise and in conjunction with other observations of the small towns that it was possible to determine the robustness of the proxies and indicators. Thus for example the data on sales tax which seemed in theory to be a good indicator was simply was too erratic and inconsistent with our common sense observations.

Through the research process the following were found to be key indicators and good *de facto* proxies for local economic development:

- Socio-economic data such as population, land values etc.;
- Agricultural Produce Marketing (APMC) figures;
- Services: water supply, electricity and petrol stations; and,
- Management (municipal) efficiency: staffing, income, expenditure and tax ratios (Amis, 1991).

The ability to be able to use government statistics and to check them against common sense (triangulation again), is an underrated skill.

· Future work: small town development in India (IDSMT)

The discussion below illustrates the sort of work that is being done with urban rapid analysis.

We are currently in the middle of a new Indian Urban Management Development Programme funded by ODA which intends to use such techniques to improve the performance of the Indian Government's Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns (IDSMT) programme. The IDSMT programme was started with the objective of slowing down the growth of metropolitan centres by providing a mechanism for increased investment in small and medium towns. The programme involves the selection of specific IDSMT towns which then qualify for investment in the form of projects in social and economic infrastructure.

IDSMT will provide capital finance for commercial development, roads, town service infrastructure, sites and services, slum improvement and employment generation schemes. The Indian Government is eager to see that these new funds are utilised. It is to this end that the ODA funded project seeks to enhance the capacity of government officials in the implementation of the IDSMT project. Specifically it is intended that Rapid Analysis methods should be used for problem-solving to help identify suitable and viable projects at the local level. It is intended that the use of such techniques will help local officials to quickly gain insights into the processes of local economic development. The project also has a complementary aim to improve local competence and management skills.

In order to try to achieve these goals, the project has involved the development of a network (or 'think tank') of trainers associated with the programme. The intention is that programmes for training IDSMT officials will be developed

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at three core training centres: the Town and Country Planning Organisation (TCPO) in the Ministry of Urban Development in New Delhi; the Regional Centre for Urban Planning and Environmental (RCUES) in Hyderabad; and the School of Planning and Architecture, Ahmedabad (SPA). In addition there will be support from other local institutions. In order to facilitate this process the network has just been involved on a seven week Training of Trainers programme in Birmingham and this year will develop short courses in India for IDSMT staff.

This process is ongoing and as such it is clearly too early to make comments on its success. It is however an exciting challenge to be associated with. Programmes to strengthen small towns do seem to be an area where such methods are particularly appropriate; for example, GTZ and USAID are both developing ideas in Kenya and Nepal respectively (Garnett *et al.*, 1989).

· Conclusion

In conclusion there is perhaps an irony here that is worth spelling out. We have found RRA a useful tool to improve our management training through an action learning approach. In this we have been almost completely instrumental. In many respects this represents an improved top-down approach. This is perhaps not the philosophy behind much of the enthusiasm for RRA/PRA. However what I think it does show is the fact that RRA codifies many statistical ideas behind reducing sampling error and reducing biases. It is not as new as it claims - indeed many recognise the ideas as being recycled from the fieldwork tradition of geography! In using proxies and triangulation we have sought to emphasise the similarity with other survey methods rather than the difference. What this seems to suggest is that the *skills* of listening, critical thinking and rigour (however defined), which we have tried to use RRA tools to improve, are more important than the *method*. As an outsider there seems to be a danger in the methodology dominating the purpose.

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