



NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Practical issues in informal data collection

Socio-economic Series 1

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Contents

FOREWORD	(iv)	Extension agents	16
SUMMARY	(iv)	Training	16
1 INTRODUCTION	1	6 CONCLUSIONS	18
2 PROJECT SURVEY PLANNING	1	7 RECOMMENDATIONS	19
3 IS RRA EFFECTIVE?	4	8 REFERENCES	20
RRA and rural agriculture	4	APPENDIX	22
Weaknesses of RRA	4		
4 USE OF RRA	5		
Conventional approaches and RRA	5		
Setting objectives	6		
Secondary data	6		
Group or individual interviews	7		
Group dynamics and informants	8		
Selecting individuals for interview	8		
Entering the village	9		
Team approach	9		
Site selection	9		
Stratification	10		
Time period	11		
Size of survey team	11		
Disciplines represented	12		
Group dynamics and survey teams	12		
Number of survey teams	12		
Frequency of data collection	13		
Duration of interviews	13		
Note taking	13		
Weaknesses in communication technique	14		
5 WIDER ISSUES AFFECTING RRA	15		
Research policy	15		
The project cycle	15		

Foreword

This series is based on work carried out under the Socio-economics Research Programme at NRI. Its purpose is to provide an easily accessible medium for current research findings. Whilst it is hoped that the series will be of interest to those concerned with development issues worldwide, it may be of particular relevance to people working in developing countries.

The topics covered by the series are quite diverse, but principally relate to applied and adaptive research activity and findings. Some papers are largely descriptive, others concentrate on analytical issues, or relate to research methodologies.

The aim is to present material in as straightforward a fashion as possible so that it can reach a wide audience.

We are interested in the views and opinions of readers and welcome any feedback to this series.

Alan Marter
Socio-economics Research Programme

Summary

The growth of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) as an approach to the initial preparation of development projects has had a significant impact on research methodology. It has reflected the shift in development over recent years to listen more to the needs voiced by local people while still allowing development workers to conduct research in spite of budget constraints.

RRA could be viewed as just a shift in approach, or as the introduction of a set of new techniques. In practice there is a danger of burdening it with too many expectations and ignoring useful lessons learned from other techniques in the past.

The authors have drawn on the extensive field experience within the Natural Resources Institute to assess the strengths and weaknesses of RRA in practice, and to make suggestions for any deficiencies by drawing on elements of older methodologies.

Needs Assessment for Agriculture: Practical Issues in Informal Data Collection is designed to provide a practical addition to the materials available to workers in the field as well as to generate discussion amongst those interested in RRA theory.

1 Introduction

If aid agencies are to instigate successful development projects and make sound planning and policy decisions in developing countries they must acquire a certain level of information about the locality concerned. Historically, the information-gathering exercises carried out by a team of specialists have tended to be protracted, expensive, narrow in their focus, and heavily weighted by preconceived ideas.

In the early 1980s the Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) approach to initial project preparation was developed. Here, a survey team comprising various disciplines interviews villagers and officials, and is present in the region for a matter of weeks rather than months or years. The approach has been widely adopted by development workers in both governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and it is still evolving.

The Social Sciences Group (SSG) of the Natural Resources Institute (NRI) has been experimenting in the field with RRA techniques in recent years, investigating ways in which the techniques can be used to focus the applied research effort of NRI technical sections. During the course of these experiments, the SSG has developed views on the most appropriate way to conduct RRAs, taking into account some of the common problems experienced. The authors look at some of the key issues and common flaws in the application of the technique and make appropriate recommendations. It is hoped that these will prove useful to the increasing number of organizations contemplating the use of RRA techniques.

2 Project survey planning

Agricultural development workers need information about rural people for planning and policy-making, and for judging the effectiveness with which projects meet their goals. Information is also needed to direct research and, in the case of applied research, to identify and improve appropriate technical interventions*.

Planning a survey to gather this information is a systematic process and should generally involve the following stages:

- (a) most importantly, setting the objectives. This is so often ignored, or taken as being obvious, that it is necessary to affirm its importance at every possible opportunity;
- (b) the subject of the survey (the units of study) should be specified;
- (c) it must be stipulated whether the information should be about the whole population, or whether it should be indicative or illustrative and not support generalizations made about the population;
- (d) populations and sampling frames† must be established. Without determining these, it is not possible to select or interpret the sample with confidence;
- (e) the level of precision for the survey must be set: for example, whether the survey will be satisfied with orders of magnitude (such as $A > B$), or whether precise parameter estimates should be sought (e.g. figures for individual household incomes or crop yields);

* Interventions in this paper refer to inputs from aid agencies.

† A sampling frame consists of the type of unit to be interviewed or measured (e.g. the farm and the farmer) and the universe to be studied (i.e. the population which the sample is to represent). An introduction to sampling frames is provided in Coate and Daplyn (1990).

- (f) the type of data processing to be used should be specified. This can help to identify the human and material resources required for processing the anticipated information, and for organizing its presentation.

These considerations will help to determine the method of data collection to be used.

The range of different methods available is often depicted as a continuum, with 'formal' techniques, involving structured questions at one extreme and 'informal' approaches, where general themes are presented as a basis for questions at the other. This is a misleading simplification. Formal surveys are often highly structured, including questionnaires and random scientific samples, and allow generalizations to be made about the population. By contrast, informal approaches often do not use scientific random sampling and are more loosely structured. Yet, there are many examples of studies which combine characteristic aspects of formal and informal studies, for example, selecting sites without using random sampling methods and then using structured questionnaires.

For simplicity, although a continuum exists, this paper will differentiate between the formal and informal approach.

There is a certain degree of built-in flexibility in informal surveys, allowing researchers to change the focus of their interviews when field conditions dictate. As a result, informal approaches are often used as exploratory surveys, allowing key problems and variables to be identified, paving the way for more structured, formal questionnaire-based surveys which study the key problems and analyse any variation in key variables.

Over the last decade, a shift in attitude has occurred towards methods of studying rural systems. Informal data-gathering techniques, emphasizing the speed of collection and analysis, cost-effectiveness,

flexibility and inter-disciplinarity are being increasingly advocated*.

The above attributes of informal surveys have been emphasized in response to perceived weaknesses in contemporary methods of studying rural systems. The speed of collection and analysis are a reaction to exhaustive studies which take years between their inception and their final reporting, with consequent delays in developing appropriate interventions. The cost-effectiveness criterion is a response to the high cost of these types of protracted study. The advantage of flexibility, allowing researchers to change direction according to what is discovered in the field, is one of the key advantages of informal techniques, and acknowledges the inherent complexity of rural systems and the impossibility of accurately anticipating field situations. In principle, flexible informal techniques have the potential to switch emphasis of studies towards areas of major 'need' which had not been identified in the planning stages.

Perhaps the main 'innovation' of the informal approach is its explicit acknowledgement of the need for inter-disciplinarity in studying rural systems. Again, the specification of this requirement is in response to what has been seen as a tendency towards 'supply-led' projects, where the needs of villagers are assumed by researchers according to their own research disciplines, without being independently validated. The interaction between social and natural scientists in the study of rural systems reduces the number of inappropriate projects and technical interventions. Indeed, a major impetus for the shift towards informal approaches has been the failure of agricultural technical development projects in the 1960s and 1970s to identify adequately the socio-economic complexities of rural production systems.

In reaction to the perceived failures, and policy shifts such as the inception of structural adjustment

* The history of this transition and the methodological foundations have been documented elsewhere, e.g. McCracken *et al.* (1988).

policies, development workers during the late 1970s and early 1980s discussed a new approach to studying rural systems which would reconcile apparent conflicts between 'academic' and 'practical' approaches, yield relatively rapid results, and accommodate the interdisciplinary approach seen as essential for the study of farming systems.

Out of this deliberation arose the process known as RRA, which was defined by Conway (1986) as: "... a systematic, but semi-structured activity carried out in the field by a multi-disciplinary team designed to acquire quickly new information on, and new hypotheses about, rural life." The method can be used for a variety of purposes, including:

- to explore rural situations, problems or issues;
- to design, implement, monitor and evaluate projects;
- to help develop, extend, and transfer technology;
- to assist in policy formulation and decision making;
- to respond to emergencies and disasters; and
- to improve, supplement, or complement other types of research.

In spite of the novelty of RRA, it is debatable whether it really represents a major change in approach. The above description by Conway certainly covers survey approaches adopted by good researchers well before the term RRA was coined, and RRA generates the same mix of quantitative and qualitative data as much research did in the past. Where RRA does constitute a new approach is in attempting to provide pseudo-academic back-up to researchers adopting the informal approach, allowing them to publish and gain academic respect for their work.

As envisaged by the originators of RRA, continuous developments have taken place to refine it. There are today four main types of RRA being practised:

- (a) exploratory RRA: to obtain initial information, and identify preliminary key questions and hypotheses;
- (b) topical RRA: to investigate a specific topic, often building upon an exploratory survey and producing an extended hypothesis as the basis for further activities;
- (c) monitoring RRA: to monitor the progress of a development activity, leading to a revised hypothesis and hopefully a more effective intervention (McCracken *et al*, 1988).
- (d) often referred to as a fourth RRA type is Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (McCracken *et al*, 1988) which involves local people in decisions about further actions based on hypotheses resulting from exploratory and topical RRA surveys.

Although many RRA techniques are used in PRA, it is arguable whether PRA meets the same challenges as RRA because of the need for prolonged, sustained interaction between the survey team and the villagers to build up trust*. It is therefore almost impossible to conduct effective PRA rapidly.

* The difference between RRA and PRA, and the need to build up relationships over a long period of time was noted in a recent workshop in Bangalore (IIED, 1991).

3 Is RRA Effective?

RRA AND RURAL AGRICULTURE

One of the underlying principles of RRA is that rural production systems need to be understood from a variety of perspectives. In part this is a reaction to previous approaches which were criticized for being biased. Bias can result from a failure to consult particular sections of the community (e.g. the poor, women, or the young), and also from discipline-rooted prejudice, where, for example, social scientists ignore key technical aspects, or technical scientists ignore key social aspects.

Many of the techniques developed for RRA have sought to address the problem of bias (e.g. triangulation, problem ranking, mapping and transects*), and in the selection of interviewees and survey team members it is important to ensure that as many different perspectives as possible are accommodated. For instance, when researching a farming system the survey team might seek the views of women farmers, male farmers and natural scientists, each bringing their own insights to the problem.

Matched with the flexibility of the RRA approach, which allows changes in direction and emphasis according to the situations encountered in the field, the explicit incorporation of a variety of perspectives acts as a safeguard against 'supply-led' interventions which ignore the needs of villagers. Provided that the RRA team is capable of communicating effectively with rural people the combination of perspectives ought to reveal sound approximations of the priorities and needs of interviewees. In this way, RRA avoids the pitfalls of the technically led, structured format, where questions

* An introduction to a 'suite' of RRA techniques is provided in McCracken *et al.* (1988).

are pre-determined, allowing little or no evaluation of the relative importance assigned by villagers to the issues and precluding the contribution of those with different perspectives. For any development organization, the RRA approach provides an important safeguard against ineffective interventions.

For this reason, RRA is often used as a preliminary survey, identifying needs or priorities of interviewees and establishing the field situation before specifying in more detail the next stages of a study.

WEAKNESSES OF RRA

In spite of the advantages of the RRA approach, there are problems with its application. To some extent, these problems were pre-empted by Carruthers and Chambers in 1981, when they stated:

"Without an open, questioning approach, RRA may simply legitimize a politically determined proposal, fail to refute false knowledge, fail to discover an alternative often more complicated explanation, or divert attention from the need for long-term studies. In short, it may simply help sponsors go wrong sooner with greater confidence. The outcome of RRA may then be to give a false or spurious air of efficiency or precision in policy matters. ..."

The sheer plausibility of RRA paradoxically represents one of its biggest problems. The allure of a recognized approach which promises not only to improve efficiency and save money, but which also accommodates contemporary political thinking about empowerment of the developing world's population, is significant. Potential users, especially those working in projects of debatable effectiveness, embrace the promise of improved potency. Interviewees themselves respond with enthusiasm to the techniques, preferring the approach of interviewers prepared to accommodate their perspectives using entertaining techniques to the tedium of some questionnaire-based exercises.

As Carruthers and Chambers (1981) point out, informal procedures are: "... more and not less

demanding of expertise." Yet, the rapidity of the process has perhaps encouraged neglect of the development of expertise on behalf of the users of the approach. The next section looks at the areas where development of this expertise is warranted.

4 Use of RRA

CONVENTIONAL APPROACHES AND RRA

Interest in RRA first resulted from the perceived failure of conventional survey techniques to uncover the necessary data for planning effective interventions. RRA therefore has its roots in a desire to develop a better field survey technique (i.e. a way of collecting data in the field). It is not an alternative to conventional survey methodology (e.g. setting objectives, selection of sites and sample frames and levels of precision, choice of data processing and survey techniques). Consequently much of the work on RRA has focused on the method of data collection rather than on the reasons for collecting data.

People meeting RRA for the first time often confuse technique and methodology, and feel that they are being offered a new survey methodology. This is not the case as what is being offered is a 'suite of techniques'. But in the confusion many worthwhile elements of the conventional methodology are ignored for being unfashionable, even though RRA techniques cannot fill the resulting gap.

As a result, RRA surveys may become mere exercises in using techniques while the real reasons for conducting the surveys are being lost. The belief that village maps must be drawn in all circumstances, regardless of the need for data on village layout, is one illustration of this phenomenon. The completion of wealth-ranking exercises without using the information to select interviewees is another.

Consequently conclusions often emphasize the banal as studies become reactive to villagers' musings rather than proactive in the face of villagers' needs. As the focus of the survey gets lost, conclusions become blurred, reducing its effectiveness for the villagers, and

hindering the development of a wider knowledge base because of the problems of data complementarity.

Rejection of conventional survey methodologies can also reduce the effectiveness of conventionally trained staff by discouraging the application of standard survey rules. Trainees who have been told that RRA represents a 'paradigm shift', and yet who have only received a short introductory course in how to apply the tools of RRA, are ill-equipped to make the kind of decisions necessary to ensure that surveys are conducted successfully. The ability to alter the direction of surveys and to remedy errors requires sufficient training in aspects of 'conventional' survey methodology such as setting objectives, site selection, etc. Because RRA is not a paradigm shift, training in RRA alone can never provide a replacement for all those conventional aspects of survey methodology. Staff trained in RRA must be aware that its adoption does not involve rejection of all they have been taught in the past.

SETTING OBJECTIVES

Setting objectives is the most important part of survey planning. Before deciding on how RRA will be used in any given situation, it is necessary to set the objectives of the survey (*why* the information is needed by the researchers), the subjects to be covered, type of information required, desired accuracy of information and timing.

Having been set, there is no reason why the objectives cannot be refined or re-specified during the survey. Indeed, if use is made of the project or logical framework approach developed in the 1970s by USAID, and now common to most development agencies including the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), this helps to specify objectives and there is an in-built propensity to re-evaluate and revise objectives at regular intervals.

RRA is more sensitive to a failure to set objectives than are more conventional approaches. Formal ques-

tionnaires involve some form of objective setting, even if only implicit through the pre-selection of both subject areas and interviewees. RRAs by contrast, are less structured and often decisions about who to interview and on which subjects, are taken in the heat of the moment in the field. Even where check-lists have been developed, as they should be in all cases, the tendency is not to follow the guidelines. If objectives are not discussed and determined beforehand, the RRA is prey to unfocused and arbitrary questions which result in a failure to find out about key areas and the development of feeble conclusions, specifying general 'key' problems such as soil fertility and health problems which, it could be argued, do not require an RRA to determine.

If there is no clear idea of the objectives of data collection, it is impossible for interviewers to monitor the effectiveness of the tools they are using. Thus, the possibility of making changes to the approach in the field is limited, and any self-corrective capacity is rendered ineffective.

As will be discussed in more detail in the training section (see page 16), the adoption of the project framework approach allows unambiguous setting of objectives. Using a project framework in conjunction with proposed RRA studies would ensure that objectives are afforded their due emphasis.

SECONDARY DATA

Using information from previously conducted work (secondary data) can improve the efficiency of studies in several ways:

- (a) it can prevent the duplication of effort by avoiding the need to gather the same information as past studies;
- (b) it allows researchers to focus their observations, select the most appropriate sites, and identify key variables in advance;

- (c) it provides background information which permits researchers to place their field studies in context;
- (d) historical data can be used in conjunction with contemporary field studies to highlight the changes characteristic of the highly dynamic farming systems of the developing world.

In general, there is a dearth of good contemporary data on rural issues in the developing world. Where good quality data does exist the problem is usually one of tracking it down. Manifest sources include local and national government departments of agriculture, rural affairs and planning, and also government statistical services. Other sources include bachelors and masters theses, usually held in university libraries, and United Nations and World Bank reports.

A surprising amount of secondary data on developing countries is unavailable in the countries themselves, to some extent reflecting the tendency of some Western researchers to collect data in developing countries but to process and publish it in their home countries. Thus, Western university departments are often a strong source of secondary data. For example, the University of Birmingham has a substantial library in its West Africa Studies Centre. Similarly, the School of African and Oriental studies has a large library containing information on Eastern and Southern Africa. With a large number of masters and doctoral degrees being completed each year at higher educational establishments, there is a rich supply of country specific information available.

Another frequently neglected source of secondary data is the archive of colonial research. This historical information can help to identify the pace and extent of change within a system. The focus of some colonial research is particularly pertinent to current areas of agricultural research interest, including basic research on famine crops.

In the case of export crops, parastatal organizations in developing countries can provide a rich source

of information on prices, processing and production. Often, they have, or had, responsibility for funding or conducting research, so providing a further source of information. Additional sources include NGOs and religious groups and their project records.

GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

A factor which creates confusion during RRAs is the question of the size of the enumeration unit, i.e. whether groups or individuals are to be the subject of interviews*. There are two main factors to consider:

- (a) the type of information sought;
- (b) the efficiency of obtaining responses.

If the information sought is descriptive, widely known and uncontroversial—for example, the number of schools, location of wells, or number of families in a village—an individual key informant is the most appropriate source. For information which is not expected to vary significantly between households—such as breeds of cattle or varieties of crops grown—a group interview may be appropriate.

However, group dynamics influence the nature and quality of the responses. For some groups, the main responses will be provided by the group's most dominant members. For others, the group may yield a modal response. For example, when asking a group how long villagers generally spend weeding their rice paddies, the group answer will probably reflect the modal amount of time. In the event that what is of interest is the *range* of different amounts of time, this may not be very helpful.

In general, group interviews should not be used to elicit information on variables which are expected to vary widely between households, such as landholding

* The term 'interview' covers all interactions with villagers.

or number of chickens—individual interviews would usually be preferable. Individual interviews may also be used when attempting to isolate differences between different (wealth) classes of household.

The efficiency of response varies according to the way groups or individuals react to the tools and therefore determines the type of interview. Generally, diagrammatic tools (e.g. for drawing or model building) are more effective if used with groups because they allow group interplay. But individuals may become reticent when asked to use them, perhaps because they are not a natural part of one-to-one interaction. The ideal may be to collect information separately from a set of individuals but the efficiency with which some RRA tools obtain such participation may force the interviewer to use a group—where informants feel more relaxed and able to give answers. In such instances, it is often important to ask about the range of responses as well as the modal or median response.

GROUP DYNAMICS AND INFORMANTS

When considering the use of group interviews, the issue of group dynamics must be addressed. In a typical village group there will be a variety of interactions which will affect the quality, or usefulness, of the responses. Groups are usually dominated by the most powerful in the village, typically the older, richer male population. The resulting bias would therefore be against the poorer, less powerful members of the village, and women in particular.

The tendency for village groups to be dominated by individuals partly determines the information that can effectively be gleaned from group interviews. If particular sections of the community are prevented from expressing their views in a group discussion, alternative formats—with individuals or sub-groups—should be used. The results of a wealth-ranking exercise in a village could be used to help identify such sub-groups or individuals.

The domination of village groups by men is a common phenomenon and prevents the input of women to group discussions. Ensuring that women are sitting with the group and not on the periphery and placing a female interviewer with the village women can help communication and improve the discussion. Timing is also important: group interviews held at times of day when meals have to be prepared will not encourage the involvement of women. The length of time demanded by the group interview is also important and can be a limiting factor for rural women particularly with their wide range of time-consuming household responsibilities. They usually have to leave group interviews before they are finished, so sub-group or individual interviews are usually more suitable. There are regions where permission must be sought before groups of women can be consulted and it is important to be sensitive to these issues.

SELECTING INDIVIDUALS FOR INTERVIEW

To ensure a range of perspectives it is often appropriate to consult individuals from a variety of backgrounds: rich and poor, migrant and indigenous, men and women, old and young, etc. There is a hypothesis that significant differences would be encountered between rich and poor households in their response to certain questions, in which case the village should be stratified accordingly. Thus, one of the first tasks on entering the village is to draw up a list of the households, noting their different characteristics.

A household list may be available from local community leaders, although it may need to be updated. Where village lists are not available, the selection and interview of a small number of key informants who know the village well and have lived there for some time should furnish one. Key informants would also be required to provide information so households could be classified according to 'important' characteristics.

The resulting list of households should then allow the survey team to select their interviewees according to the characteristics which they believe to be important. Thus, a balanced sample of wealthy and poor, old and young, female-headed and male-headed households, etc. can be determined before interviewing begins. For focused studies, livestock ownership, for example, such an initial characterization of the village households may be highly relevant and include, in this case, the type and number of livestock owned.

ENTERING THE VILLAGE

Gathering information starts at the beginning of the journey to the site; noting the quality of access, distances (if using a vehicle, use can be made of the tachometer), vegetation, etc.

First impressions condition the way that villagers respond to a survey team. It is important that basic courtesy is observed, such as making sure that interviewers get out of the vehicle before they start asking questions, or that village protocol is followed in introductions to the villagers (usually this will involve introduction to the village chiefs and/or elders first). Pre-visit knowledge may indicate important customs to observe.

Given the limited attention span of human beings, it is important to start the data-gathering process as soon as possible. There will always be a degree of ceremony when first arriving in the village and it will not be possible to get down to asking questions right away. Similarly, there will usually be a delay whilst villagers are assembled, chairs are found, etc. During these delays, a well organized team will already be gleaning information on issues such as village infrastructure which can be done in asides to villagers whilst others are assembling.

Thus, it is important that teams understand who has responsibility for which task and that they start to perform these tasks as soon as they enter the village.

The team's driver can also be a useful source of information about the area, particularly concerning road access. Instead of waiting by the vehicle while the researchers conduct the interview, the driver can be delegated to collect information, for example, about market prices. Although distortions may still be present, the prices obtained by the driver will probably be less distorted than those obtained by other researchers.

TEAM APPROACH

Care should be taken not to mislead the villagers about the intentions of the survey. Where the impression is given that the survey is concerned with a certain crop, or with providing a concrete outcome such as a road, villagers will tend to tailor their responses towards this apparent concern since, to a certain extent, expectations have been raised. Similarly, it may be necessary to clarify that the survey has nothing to do with revenue collection.

SITE SELECTION

The issue of site selection is common to all survey methodologies, whether formal or informal. Appropriate decisions taken at the site selection stage of studies will determine the quality of the inferences that can be drawn from survey results. It is particularly important to consider the significance of bias when selecting sites. For instance, survey teams have been criticized for exhibiting a spatial and seasonal bias, choosing locations that are nearest to roads and are most easily reached during the dry season.

RRA makes great play of acknowledging the effect of bias and basic texts usually note the explicit recognition of bias as one of its fundamental characteristics. Note that the recognition and the avoidance of bias are not the same thing. RRA states that it is important to be aware of the biases usually encountered and, where practicable, to balance them with other perspectives.

Ironically, this can still lead to bias in site selection when, as is often the case, zealous researchers go out of their way to find sites which are difficult to reach during times of the year when travelling is least practicable. This has two potentially damaging effects:

- (a) it assumes that the rationale of site selection is only to seek out perversity, when, usually, this is not the basis for site selection; and
- (b) it can have deleterious repercussions on both the morale of the team and the time available for survey.

If a team insists on visiting the field during the height of the wet season, appropriate gear needs to be taken to avoid a perpetually damp and dejected team.

In contrast to the tendency to seek out perverse sites, there is also a tendency to select only what are thought to be typical sites. This, too, is not a sound basis for site selection since it excludes the atypical site which may contain interesting aspects and help to explain inter-relationships between variables.

If a truly inaccessible area is selected, the team should be aware of the amount of time that could be taken up by difficulties with transport. Awkward sea passages that depend on weather conditions can maroon teams for several days. In this instance, the advantages of visiting a remote outpost should be weighed against the number of sites which would have to be foregone to visit this site.

STRATIFICATION

Stratification is a means of improving sampling efficiency, by dividing the population into subsets within which the variability of key factors is expected to be lower. A subset exhibits greater homogeneity than the population. A typical example is that of agro-ecological zones where an area is divided into subsets based on

homogeneity in rainfall, farming systems or even crop yields.

A secondary reason for stratification is to ensure adequate coverage of major variables. The definition of 'major' may be related to a hypothesized relationship between variables. For example, a hypothesized link between village wheat output and distance from urban markets would provide a *prima facie* case for stratifying by distance from urban markets. If no such stratification were undertaken, researchers may fail to pick up the effects of market distance on output simply by failing to pick up a cross-section of sites with different distances from urban markets.

The issue of stratification is one which has to be addressed by both formal and informal surveys. However, it has a particular relevance for informal, rapid surveys where time is especially limited. Well chosen stratification strategies can help to ensure that perceived linkages between key variables are investigated in the most effective manner.

The success of stratification depends on the quality of the data used, their accuracy should not be questionable. This may be important when stratifying by population density if no recent population studies have been completed.

If the sample has not been formally stratified at the planning stage, appropriate adjustments could be used in the field, both in site selection and in individuals contacted, to try to obtain a cross section of the perceived key variables. However, if the sample has been randomly selected, any adjustments made to it will negate the use of results to generalize about the population.

Another precaution which may be useful when stratifying samples is one against non-proportional stratification. Take the example of a survey where stratification is specified to allow selection of both high and low population density areas. If an equal number of sites in each stratum are studied, a relatively higher proportion of those living in low density areas will be interviewed. Thus, generalizations about behaviour in

higher density areas will be based on smaller samples and will be less credible.

TIME PERIOD

Although RRA is meant to be rapid, the time constraint often prevents survey objectives from being fully realised. The amount of time available for the survey will be largely determined by the availability of funds and staff. The first step in survey planning should always be to consider the objectives of the survey. As there is always a trade off between objectives and resources, objectives need to be prioritized and then the minimum amounts of resources required can be determined.

Three of the most frequently overlooked factors which can lead to time constraint problems are listed below.

Time pressures on local staff

Good local staff are usually involved in a number of studies simultaneously, and are likely to be the single most important constraint to the amount of time that can be spent on the survey. This becomes particularly important during the write-up phase. As a major part of local salaries is often made up of field allowances, local staff can be more willing to allot time to the field work than to headquarters-based report writing.

Travelling time

The amount of time required for travelling to and from survey sites must allow for the state of the roads at the time of the survey and where the team is planning to overnight so that people are not forced into curtailing interviews in order to make it to hotels or camp sites. It is in connection with this question that the decision about whether to visit during the wet season, and whether to visit distant sites needs to be taken.

Time for report writing

The most commonly under-prioritized area of studies is usually that of information analysis. The lack of time allocated to this area may be one explanation for the flimsy conclusions produced by some studies: the most interesting conclusions and inter-relationships will generally be founded on subtle instances which need to be discussed before they are identified. Yet, these subtleties are also the first to be forgotten when the team returns from the field. Thus, sufficient time must be allowed for the full write-up of the report, preferably in the field. For an informal survey, where time is usually acknowledged to be a major constraint, the early production of a report is an obvious priority. To expedite the writing-up process, a draft plan of the report format can be drawn up before field work starts, and responsibilities can be divided up between team members in advance. There must be adequate time for the report to be circulated amongst the team for their verifications and comment.

SIZE OF SURVEY TEAM

Particularly in the early stages of applying RRA techniques in a survey, there is a tendency to have over-large groups taking part in field studies. This usually happens when surveys try to combine the role of training and execution and allow any number of additional staff to be sent into the field, even if they are just there to observe. This leads to a number of problems. Villagers generally find large groups intimidating and disrupting, particularly where foreigners and local worthies are included. This compounds the tendency for village officialdom to take over the proceedings, making it yet more difficult to consult a representative cross-section of the village.

Large groups can present logistical problems for the survey. Finding overnight accommodation can be a problem in towns and is even more difficult in villages.

It is easier for a small team to write up the RRA. This is an important point to note as it has to be completed as early as possible after the end of the field work, since much of the informal information is in the form of untranscribed impressions and notions which may be forgotten or distorted with time.

Based on the experience of the SSG, the optimal group size is two to three researchers, including a cross-section of disciplines—accompanied perhaps by one or two local extension staff who can provide background knowledge and an element of reality checking, and who can act as translators. However, the use of local extension staff can complicate matters as they tend to dominate group meetings to establish their status within the village, and often prevent villagers from having their say. Extensionists may also try to conceal major problems, believing their existence to reflect on their own effectiveness.

DISCIPLINES REPRESENTED

The inter-disciplinary approach does not necessarily depend on disciplines being represented in the team. Indeed, this could lead to complications: apart from the sheer number of people, there is also the problem of responsibility. With one person for each major discipline there is a tendency for too much depth in questions. Furthermore, when a large number of different specialisms are represented in one team, each 'expert' tends to stick to his/her own subject, which prevents the exchange and sharing of ideas fundamental to the inter-disciplinary approach.

In most cases the best team structure is a small, two- or three-person team which avoids the division of responsibility problems encountered in large, multi-disciplinary teams. Smaller teams recognize the need to address issues broadly and not to limit them to the specialism of the individual. This results in better co-ordination of questions on different subjects.

The ideal representation of disciplines for a team of two is possibly one social scientist and one natural scientist. Given the consequent lack of coverage of some specialisms it would be an advantage if the two team members were generalists, rather than restricted specialists. This may not be the case, though, for more focused RRA studies where needs have been quite tightly defined.

GROUP DYNAMICS AND SURVEY TEAMS

The quality of the information collected during the interviews depends on the cohesion of the interviewers. If not well co-ordinated, interviews can degenerate into a series of unrelated questions which leave the interviewee confused and therefore generate poor quality information. Interviewers should feel comfortable about interacting with their colleagues and should understand the necessity of the inter-disciplinary approach. But often the composition of the teams precludes this. Particular exacerbating factors include: the presence of juniors and their seniors on the same teams; conflict between different technical disciplines; the presence of foreigners; derogatory attitudes towards women members of the team; and intolerance of field hardships.

Difficulties within the team are particularly important at the write-up stage.

NUMBER OF SURVEY TEAMS

If large numbers of people are to carry out the survey, there will be a tendency to form more than one team. Although this will extend coverage of the survey, it also carries a significant potential disadvantage because it obliges the survey to be more structured. If the survey is semi-structured, teams may follow disparate approaches, with the result that coverage of key factors is not complete across all survey sites. One solution is

to make the survey more structured, but this compromises the advantages associated with a flexible approach.

Another solution is the so-called *sondeo* approach, where participants form small, inter-disciplinary two-person sub-groups and there is regular exchange of members between them. The exchange ensures that there is some harmony in approach between groups.

FREQUENCY OF DATA COLLECTION

Data collected during the survey will be of two basic types: seasonal and non-seasonal. Seasonal data, such as price and labour inputs, varies throughout the year and is best collected in multiple visits. Non-seasonal data, such as size of holding and farming system, remain constant throughout the year. Non-seasonal data can be collected in a single visit.

Multiple visits are not feasible for most informal surveys because of the extra time involved in interviewing and the consequent burden on available resources. Thus, to collect seasonal data in a single visit, informal studies have to rely on what is termed 'recall' data, i.e. the recollections of the interviewees. This information is unreliable for gathering detailed knowledge, but is useful for identifying an idea of when things occur and the order of magnitude of variations.

Rapid or informal studies are not usually used to identify substantial detail on seasonally fluctuating variables. They tend to be used, for example, to establish *when* prices fluctuate, rather than *how* mainly because of the fallibility of recall data. For example, interviewees may be able to remember the amount of money spent on food on each of the last three days, but beyond this recall is less and less precise and tends towards a general or average figure. If the survey does not require such averages, the use of recall data is questionable.

DURATION OF INTERVIEWS

There is no absolute limit to the length of an interview, and much will depend on language skills and individual characters. But interviewers should always be aware of signs of uninterest and boredom, and after a certain point there is an inverse relationship between the length of time spent interviewing and the quality of the answer. Interviewees generally become tired and uninterested after more than an hour of questions and accuracy of their responses deteriorates. Thus it is generally wise to restrict interviews to under one hour.

The time of day can also affect the outcome of interviews. The most appropriate time of day will differ according to local conditions and local advice should be sought to confirm when villagers are most accessible. In areas where farms and gardens are a long way from the village interviewers have to make the choice between consulting villagers at their farms, in which case a long walk may be necessary, or meeting villagers before they leave for their farms or after they return, i.e. early in the morning or in the evening.

The questioning techniques involved in the RRA approach should be flexible, so interviews can be conducted whilst interviewees are occupied with other tasks. Indeed, there are positive advantages in posing questions about an activity whilst the interviewee is actually engaged in that activity.

It is common for villages to have at least one day during the week when no individual work is undertaken to enable communal work to take place, such as repairing communal buildings or cleaning communal areas. During these days, most of the village will usually be available for consultation and it may be useful to identify them when planning the timing of the interview.

NOTE TAKING

While it is important to take notes of key factors that come up during interviews or conversations with

villagers, excessive note taking will tend to disrupt the flow of a discussion and can be counter-productive. This point has encouraged some participants in RRAs to neglect note taking altogether. There is clearly a balance to be struck between too many and not enough notes: in general, it is best to keep note taking to a minimum during the conversations and to make additions later if necessary. Where more than one interviewer is present, the tasks of note taking and questioning can be divided between the team.

It is important that the RRA team meets each evening to review the day's questions, relying on each other to fill in missing details and, crucially, to discuss key findings. It is at this point where the advantages of the inter-disciplinary approach make themselves apparent, as the team members from different disciplines exchange views and information based on their discipline specific perceptions. Teams can also now make decisions about any necessary revision to their objectives.

While this is being discussed by the team, one member should take detailed notes which, if taken in a systematic manner and made legible, can be typed up on return to base and act as an invaluable reference. If this is not done, given the fallibility of memory and field notes, key facts are lost. With the effort that has gone into collecting the data for the survey, the last thing that you want is to present data or information which is not substantiated from village conversations.

WEAKNESSES IN COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUE

RRA places a major emphasis on contact between the farmer and the researcher; therefore RRA techniques tend to assume a high level of skill in communication. Often, however, this skill is underdeveloped, and interviewers fail to elicit accurate information. Typical examples of communication failures include: not talking to women; not talking to poor households; poor ques-

tioning techniques (asking closed and leading questions); not listening to answers; and intimidating interviewing techniques (large numbers of interviewers questioning one or two interviewees). These 'technical' areas of communication technique can be redressed through training workshops, ideally held along with RRA training sessions.

Other communication problems may be less easy to rectify, particularly where prejudice exists on the part of researchers against the rural population. The term 'prejudice' is an emotive one but describes the attitude of many researchers, in both the developed and developing world. It may simply be an underestimation of the capacities of the rural population to understand concepts and to provide information about them.

More importantly, however, the prejudice may be due to preconceptions about the nature of the 'problem' encountered by the interviewees. As Chambers and Carruthers (1981) suggest, without an open-minded approach, research can simply validate prejudice. Where technical prejudice is the issue, problem identification becomes inaccurate and researchers simply confirm that village problems lie in the domain of their technical specialism.

One of the RRA approach's most important contributions to development research is to help avoid this problem, through obliging interviewers to accommodate the views both of researchers from different technical backgrounds and of the villagers themselves. Thus, the tendency to develop inappropriate interventions which fail to take account of the realities within rural societies, their resource availability, and the objectives of the villagers themselves, is mitigated.

Another frequently encountered problem is that of language, and often local researchers may be no better versed in the local language or dialect than their western counterparts. The language skills of RRA teams should be verified before they set out for the field.

5 Wider issues

RESEARCH POLICY

RRA techniques can be used to identify perceptions clients have of the constraints they face, and to combine them with the interpretation of other empirical evidence collected by team members. They can then identify constraints within farming systems, for example, which may be relaxed through technical intervention. Information on the wider socio-economic environment may indicate, in broad terms, the types of intervention most likely to be appropriate. Whether this process of needs assessment should be continued beyond this point is debatable. While more detailed, diagnostic information on clients' needs might be desirable, the time and cost required to collect it may be considered excessive.

Research policy must balance highly applied, needs-specific development work and more basic, fundamental research. The use of RRA to focus the applied, needs-specific research is unambiguous, its use in conjunction with fundamental research is less clear.

The basic nature of many of the problems which basic research addresses tends to lead to relatively long-term projects which can cause problems if there is no feedback provision to ensure that the research objectives keep pace with changes in the outside world. As an example, much effort could be expended in finding a means of controlling a particular disease on a specific crop, but if villagers have efficiently moved away from that crop to another, resistant crop, the research programme ought to be re-evaluated*. Thus, some means of providing information on end user needs is required to provide information to both researchers and project managers, on both minor and major

* This is not the same thing as terminating a project.

changes in emphasis. RRA methods are of use here in providing that insight in a rapid and cost effective manner.

While it is important that scientists involved in basic research are kept apprised of changes in the requirements and perceptions of the end-users of their innovations, it is also important that they are given adequate time to do their work effectively. Continued revision and reappraisal can be disruptive to long-term programmes, and care should be taken not to allow RRA and its needs assessment to tyrannize over 'good science'.

RRA methods which emphasize needs assessment can also be used to inform and guide applied research programmes. Here RRA can be used in two main ways:

- (a) to inform decisions made on future research areas (for example, to determine which crops should be worked on, or within a particular crop to determine whether pathology, entomology or another area should represent the focus of activity); and
- (b) as part of the crucial feedback loop of ongoing research. For example, ongoing applied research on post-harvest handling should be periodically tested against reports from needs assessment surveys focusing on the same subject.

THE PROJECT CYCLE

RRA can play an important role in the project cycle. To circumvent the project failures of the past where inappropriate and unwanted interventions were forced on end-users, RRA methods should be used to design the project, and focus on real and locally perceived needs.

In response to the rapidly changing environments in the developing world, RRA methods can also be used throughout the life of a project to allow project managers to fine tune and adapt their structures to

cope with changes in priorities and perceptions. In this manner, RRA can be used as a form of monitoring input.

RRA methods can also be used at project milestone stages, where decisions about subsequent phases of projects are taken. Within the project framework, the output of an RRA exercise should be specified as an 'objectively verifiable indicator'.

At the end of a project, the methods also have a role to play in evaluation, feeding information on client views and post-project needs back to project evaluators, allowing comparison of pre- and post-project situations.

EXTENSION AGENTS

RRA is not only suitable for use by researchers, it is also a useful tool for extension workers. Simple preference ranking which reveals both preferences and criteria for decisions of, say, which crop varieties to plant, can help extension workers to understand their clients' decision-making process. Other tools, such as seasonal calendars, can also help extension workers to establish the appropriate sequence for their activities.

TRAINING

RRA is a hands-on technique. While a good deal of preparation can be achieved through training programmes, real competence can only be achieved through field experience, and trainees should be allowed time to experiment with RRA techniques and discuss their experiences. Training programmes should therefore involve at least two field visits, allowing participants to make errors, then discuss and remedy them. To be effective in the field, RRA teams need to be innovative and interactive, and training should also reflect this. But it is more a question of practice than something that can be taught in the classroom. Practice in, and subsequent evaluation of, the use of RRA tools

to achieve agreed objectives is vital to gain necessary experience.

The field sites selected for the training programmes should be as representative as possible. There is a tendency to visit the most accessible villages which have already been approached by many other outside groups and individuals. The villagers' familiarity with outsiders and their techniques can provide a distorted picture of the problems that are likely to be encountered on real RRAs.

Training programmes also tend to emphasize the use of the RRA tools rather than the goals of data collection, partly because training in the use of tools is a relatively straightforward process which has been developed to be flexible and user-friendly. The emphasis placed on techniques adds to the weaknesses in the RRA approach that have already been identified.

There is often pressure to expand a small training programme for a limited number of people, usually with a common point of reference, into an over-large general RRA training programme where resources are too thinly spread and nobody ends up being adequately trained. Any possibility of developing a team spirit and a common purpose can also be mitigated by the sheer size of the exercise. In a large group, there is frequently a disparity in the language skills which can complicate training workshops.

Before training in RRA techniques themselves are discussed, other areas may need to be covered such as communication and project frameworks. Communication training is discussed on page 14.

The project framework is an analytical tool designed to test the logical relationship between a project's goals, objectives, outputs and inputs. It takes the form of a table dividing the project into stages on the path to an ultimate goal, and at all stages it provides a means for testing achievement and identifying obstacles. It is helpful to participants if they have been trained in the use of project frameworks before embarking on an RRA course because the issue of objectives is made very clear. Wide and specific objec-

tives, plus the means of addressing them through activities and the associated indicators of achievement, are all made explicit in a project framework. It is therefore an appropriate context in which to discuss information-gathering activities, since trainees can identify why they are collecting the information and how it might be used once it has been processed.

As the success of an informal survey is highly dependent on the common purpose of the team, its flexibility in dealing with unforeseen situations, and its commitment to the objectives, the most appropriate starting point is usually to discuss objectives. If they have been developed co-operatively there is a much greater chance that team members will make the necessary sacrifices in the field to achieve them.

Having been discussed in abstract, the objectives should be discussed as they relate to the information needs of the training programme itself. Trainees can then discuss their own requirements resulting from the objectives set for the training exercise. This would yield a list of basic subject areas, information types and rudimentary levels of precision. The training programme could then lead on to a discussion of the basic precepts of the RRA approach, and a clarification of how it fits into the larger picture of data collection methodology. The different tools available could then be introduced, preferably in relation to the information needs within the training exercise itself.

Armed with an outline of how to set objectives, an idea of the information needs of the training exercise, and a synopsis of the basic RRA tools and approaches, trainees should be able to develop a relatively detailed check-list of the precise information needs of the exercise, and to specify which tools should be used to collect which pieces of information. With the check-list, team members should be able to prioritize their data needs. This ensures that unnecessary questions are not asked in the field, and that the team has an idea of which areas are the most important, should time constraints become binding.

A suitable period must be allowed for the trainees to evaluate their field work, to write up their information and to interpret the data. One approach that has worked in the past is to assign a particular subject to each member of the trainee team, obliging all to participate in the write up. There should be enough time for trainees to read the draft synthesis of the field work, so that they can add information or qualify statements.

6 Conclusions

RRA offers the hope of more focused, pertinent technical interventions which may help to accelerate development. It does this through taking deliberate steps to ensure that researchers understand the complexity and workings of rural systems, effected by stressing the importance of the inter-disciplinary approach to studies and allowing flexibility in the information gathering process. Thus, technical interventions are developed with an eye not only for technical performance, but also for their suitability within the production and social systems which exist. As the new appraisal approaches are rapid and cost-effective, there is also the promise of more timely and cheaper interventions.

The participation with local people, increasingly stressed under RRA, offers further potential improvements in the administration of agricultural development. In the approach, target populations are involved at an early stage in planning their own development. This encourages more sensitive delivery systems, where villagers are a part of the process and can comment and adapt through established channels. Given the adaptation required for any new interventions, this clearly offers the promise of more effective development.

In spite of the advantages offered by the RRA approach, in practice a number of problems can develop which compromise its effectiveness and, worse, add spurious credibility to interventions. The main problem is that the process (the method of data collection) can dominate the content (the reason for collecting the data). This tendency is exacerbated when appropriate objectives have not been set. There is also a tendency for the enthusiasm surrounding RRA to lead researchers to neglect other key aspects of survey methodology, such as site selection.

Problems can appear due to the apparent simplicity of the RRA approach. The tools and approaches require some experience for them to be applied effectively, yet the 'rapid' component of RRA tends to under-emphasize this aspect. Again, researchers unaware of how best to apply the techniques run the risk of false validation.

RRA, particularly in its more recent 'participatory' guises, can encourage aimless and feeble assessments of interviewees' needs. This is not necessarily a reflection of the failure to set objectives but of the difficulties of defining a need. For applied research, it is not helpful to conduct studies which conclude that broad issues such as health or soil fertility are the main areas of need.

7 Recommendations

To ensure that objectives are set and discussed before RRA field studies are undertaken, an introductory training in the project framework approach is warranted. This approach makes definite assertions of the wider and specific objectives of any project, and makes clear the links between objectives and activities. Furthermore, the project framework approach demands that objectives are re-appraised at regular intervals and therefore encourages the revision of survey objectives, where appropriate, allowing increased flexibility and sensitivity of rural research.

In introducing RRA to researchers, the technique should be explained in terms of its place in survey methodology. The strong and weak points of the approach should be discussed, and contrasted with more formal, structured approaches. In particular, the continued importance of standard aspects of survey methodology—site and sample selection, data processing, etc.—should be emphasized. The complementarity of formal and informal approaches must also be discussed, indicating how research strategies can, for example, begin with an RRA to focus on a particular area, then follow up with a formal, focused questionnaire, then followed perhaps, with a series of case studies using RRA.

Training in RRA cannot be accomplished in a few days. Acknowledging the limited resources available for training, programmes should be established which allow trainees to build and consolidate their understanding of the approach. Thus, the training is an ongoing process, not something that finishes with the departure of the training consultants. Training programmes should also be small enough to allow participants to reach common levels of understanding. The importance of communication skills in conducting RRAs cannot be over-emphasized, thus, where neces-

ary, additional training in communication principles should be undertaken.

The use of RRA for defining needs can produce feeble conclusions which are of little use in focussing applied research. There is a strong argument for initial specification of interviewees' needs. RRA can then be used either to falsify the researchers hypothesis that there is a need in this area, or to demonstrate its priority according to the villagers. The dogmatic insistence on keeping an open mind about villagers' needs does not have to preclude the initial assumption of principal needs by researchers. The importance of the open-minded approach is to be able to verify that these needs are indeed paramount, and that other, more pressing needs do not exist. Thus, this type of focus on a particular crop or resource must not prevent researchers from maintaining a wider perspective.

8 References

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Project framework

PROJECT TITLE: BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF PROJECTS

PROJECT STRUCTURE

INDICATORS OF ACHIEVEMENT AND VALUE

WIDER (i.e. sector or national) OBJECTIVES

What are the wider problems which the project will help to resolve?

What are the quantitative ways of measuring, or qualitative ways of judging, whether these broad objectives have been achieved?

IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES

What are the intended immediate effects on the project area or target group?

What are the expected benefits (or disbenefits) and to whom will they go?

What improvements or changes will the project bring about?

What are the quantitative measures (including the realised internal rate of return), or qualitative evidence, by which achievement and distribution of effects and benefits can be judged?

OUTPUTS

What outputs (kind, quantity and by when) are to be produced by the project in order to achieve the Immediate Objectives? E.g. teaching institution, miles of road built or rehabilitated, irrigation system and associated management installed, persons trained.

INPUTS

What materials/equipment or services (personnel, trained etc.) are to be provided at what cost over what period

by: — ODA

— other donors

— recipient?

**PERIOD OF FUNDING:
FROM F/T TO F/T
TOTAL FUNDING:
DATE FRAMEWORK PREPARED/REVISED:**

**HOW INDICATORS CAN BE QUANTIFIED
OR ASSESSED**

ASSUMPTIONS, RISKS AND CONDITIONS

What sources of information exist or can be provided cost-effectively?

What conditions external to the project are necessary if the project's Immediate Objectives are to contribute to the Wider Objectives?

What sources of information exist or can be provided cost-effectively?
Does provision for collection need to be made under Inputs-Outputs?

What are the factors not within the control of the project which, if not present, are liable to restrict progress from Outputs to achievement of Immediate Objectives?

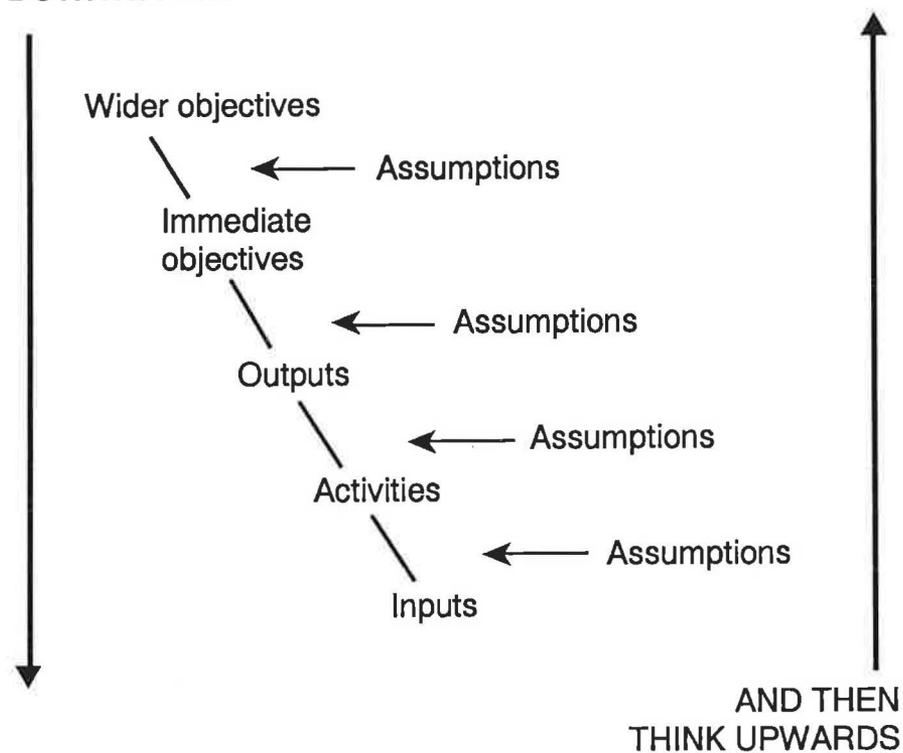
What are sources of information?

What external factors must be realised to obtain planned Outputs on schedule?

What are sources of information?

What decisions or actions outside control of funding body are necessary for inception of project?

HOW TO PREPARE THE PROJECT FRAMEWORK

PLAN
DOWNWARDS

Source: Guide to Aid Procedures (ODA)