

A critique on participatory rural appraisal (PRA) as a data collection tool

M. RAMASUBRAMANIAN, S. SEERALAN AND V. SEKAR

See end of the article for authors' affiliations

Correspondence to :

M. RAMASUBRAMANIAN
Department of
Agricultural Extension
and Rural Sociology,
Agricultural College and
Research Institute,
MADURAI (T.N.)
INDIA

ABSTRACT

Social research and data collection are inseparable. Data collection tool is a weapon in the hand of a social researcher, the sharpness of which decides the accuracy of results. For a very long time we have been using traditional data collection tools such as questionnaire survey, case study method, projective methods etc. In the recent past, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) has been emerging as a data collection tool in social research. Initially, it has been used to draw strategic plan to develop an area by non-Governmental organisations (NGO) and by some Government institutions. But PRA's role as a data collection tool is recently felt and it is being increasingly used for social science research. In agricultural extension, the researchers used PRA for identification of research priorities, field problem identification, training need assessment, infrastructure facilities availability etc. An exhaustive list of PRA tools recommended for various information required is given which will give a lucid picture of an array of PRA tools available. This article is an epitome of how PRA tools can overcome the difficulties in other data collection tools and the inherent flaws in PRA itself.

INTRODUCTION

Data collection is an integral part of any social science research. Researchers of social science are using different data collection tools for varied situations, nature of respondents and objectives of the study. This includes questionnaire method, interview method, observation method, projective techniques, case study method etc. Researchers use appropriate methods for the objectives in hand. The success of social science research largely depends on the appropriate selection of data collection tool and the way in which the tool is applied by the researcher. The greater the appropriation of data collection tool, the greater would be the precision of results of the research. This has been proved through several research findings. A method suitable to one situation may not fit into another situation. Social scientists have been experimenting different data collection tools and continuously searching for a versatile tool, which could explore the required data from individuals with whom the research is conducted. Further, a good data collection tool should be cheap, less time consuming and effective in eliciting information from both extrovert and introvert type of individuals. While contemplating such a cost-effective versatile and novel tool, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) ranks first for the social scientists and it has its ramifications in all sorts of social research. This

article is an effort to highlight the importance of PRA as a data collection tool and application of different PRA tools for varied objectives. This article bears the views of different social researchers worldwide about PRA and its critical issues.

Critics about questionnaire surveys:

Among different tools available, questionnaire is most widely used in India. This western research tool in a foreign setting had attracted considerable criticism for reasons of cultural insensitivity by O'Barr *et al.* (1973) and Chen and Murray (1976). Social scientists had been discussing the strengths and weaknesses of formal surveys for many years. For example, the limitations of questionnaire survey have been described by Zarkovich (1966), Moris (1970) and Zeller and Carmines (1980).

Chambers (1983) argued that in rural areas of under developed countries, questionnaire surveys are difficult to design and administer, time consuming and expensive to implement, and often produced results which would be either wrong or which could only be confirmed by more research. He argued that when data analysis took place in an office or laboratory, it became difficult to cross check information of follow-up interesting results because of the physical problems of relocating respondents in remote areas with poor roads

Key words :
Rural appraisal,
Data collection
tool, PRA tools

Accepted :
September, 2009