

THE REALITIES OF CONDUCTING AN RRA IN A NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL PROGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

For quite some time there has been interest in Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) as a tool for development. A RRA Workshop was first held in Sussex back in the late 1970s, and most recently an International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal was held in Khon Kaen in September 1985. For some time there has been interest in RRA for the so-called "site-description" stage of doing on farm FSR. Use of RRAs in Farming Systems work has dated from the mid 1970s in Latin America and Africa. In Thailand there have been RRAs in the university communities connected with the Ford Foundation Cropping Systems work at Chiang-mai and Khon Kaen Universities. RRA in a Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative (MOAC) Farming Systems project was first used in the Northeast Rainfed Agricultural Development (NERAD) Project in 1983. This paper will describe and analyze this RRA.

RRA has been defined by Beebe (1985: 2) as "a way of organizing people and time for collecting and analyzing information where time constraints demand decisions before a local situation can be fully understood". It was in this context that in NERAD two RRAs were conducted first in February and March of 1983 and the second in December of 1983. The combined experiences related here will be those general to the concepts, organization, training, etc. Specific experiences of the Team will mostly be that in Nakhorn Phanom. The NERAD RRA was called Rapid Assessment Technique, thus it will be referred to as a RAT--any reference to RRAs will be in the generic sense. The RAT was used as a tool to gain information to plan and implement interventions, such as, cropping systems trials and better water resource utilization.

BACKGROUND

The Northeastern Region of Thailand has among the poorest soils in Southeast Asia and most erratic rainfall patterns. Under optimum conditions

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less than twenty percent of the arable land can potentially be irrigated by conventional medium-or largescale irrigation projects. Thus, it is no surprise that the majority of the farmers of the NE are subsistence-oriented, rainfed rice farmers--the poorest in the Kingdom. Their farming systems include: some field or vegetable crops in a fraction of paddy land before and/or after rice production; upland fields planted in cassava or kenaf; two or three head of cattle and buffalo along with a few chickens or pigs; fishing and hunting gathering activities; some cottage industry; and off-farm employment. To address these conditions most of the technology developed by the national agricultural programs of the (MOAC) have either been commodity-or discipline oriented under the relatively protected conditons of the departmental experiment stations. In this technology development process the linkages between research and extension have been very tenuous.

The purpose of the NERAD Project is to develop in nine representative tambons a replicable agricultural development program for increasing farm production and income among lower income farmers in rainfed agricultural zones. It intends to establish adaptive agricultural research and extension programs which are readily accessible and responsive to needs of poor farmers. The Project does R & D (research and development) on promising on-farm research and extension processes, methodologies, and techniques which are tailored for use in regular departmental programs.

RAPID ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUE

There was a threefold purpose for the RATs in NERAD. First the RAT was to provide a mechanism to establish collaboration among farmers, researchers from various agencies (and disciplines) and extension personnel. Secondly, out of this dialog common understandings of farmers' problems and needs could be attained. And finally, field level staff, who were part of the RAT Teams, would have for themselves the opportunity to assess, plan, and evaluate on-farm trials which were responsive to farmers' real situations. The RAT experience will be here presented in terms of the concept of the Principal Village (PV), preparation, implementation, and lessons learned.

1. PRINCIPAL VILLAGE

In trying to promote linkages between research and extension the Project adopted DOAE's concept of Principal Villages as types of "demonstration villages"

for extension activities, and applied it to the implementation of cropping systems on-farm trials (OFT) in those villages in the nine NERAD tambons. This provided a ready linkage of research and extension since DOAE was to be a partner in those trials.

2. PREPARATION

Preparation of data for the RAT teams to analyze was necessary to their operation. OAE prepared pre-project summaries of the socio-economic surveys. DLD summarized their land use classification which was gathered and analyzed in 1981-82. NEROAC prepared weather data for the changwats. Based on their experience on agro-ecosystem analysis KKU prepared a "Handbook of the Nine NERAD Tambons". This data was presented to the RAT teams for their consideration along with training on RRA methodologies and techniques.

3. RAT IMPLEMENTATION

It is within the context of the overall cropping systems strategy that the RATs must be considered. Before the cropping systems activities were undertaken in 1983, it was decided that the Project would have to be oriented to the key issues of conducting OFTs and the consequent organizational requirements to carry them out. General discussions about the trials and the possibility of RATs had been initially taken place on several occasions in 1982 with all the departments in the Cropping Systems Work Group (CS W/G): DOAE, DOA, OAE, CPD, DLD, and NEROAC. The idea of using the PV as an intervention point had been discussed with key DOAE central level staff in the Fall of 1982. However, the field level staffs of the respective agencies of the CS W/G were not fully cognizant of the strategy. Since there was inadequate time to do a proper assessment and planning before the ensuing Rainy Season, it was decided that the 1983 CS trials would be undertaken in only four of the nine PVs. Thus, one PV from each province was chosen to begin building a system for the CS OFTs for the 1983 trials. The trials of 1984 would involve all nine PVs, and a subsequent RAT would assess the remaining five PVs.

First, provincial level staffs were oriented to the entire strategy and processes--from this orientation through the assessment, (ie., the RATs) to the trials themselves. Roles for each agency were established and for their representatives to assess, plan, implement, and evaluate the trials. Coordination of interagency processes and activities was stressed. Additional data was

solicited on the PVs; their respective: tambons, amphurs, and changwats; and other possible data needs which the RAT teams might envision. Then DOAE staff were oriented, eg., Subject Matter Specialists (SMS), Kaset Amphurs (KA), and Tambon Extension Agents (TEA). Extension's roles in the trials were clarified with the TEA being a key person on the RAT team, as the MOAC's representative at the village level. Project utilization and support of the PV concept was explained and counsel sought not only in connection with the CS trials but also for tambon planning. Finally, the PVs were visited and oriented as to their roles in the CS trials process, including the RAT (assessment) process and the roles for farmer--cooperators in the trials. In most cases these four villages had not assumed their PV functions within the DOAE system. Thus the whole concept of PVs in NERAD had to be clarified within the DOAE context.

The RAT teams from the four changwats were given training on the techniques of RRAs; agro-ecosystems analysis of data; presentation of data from pre-project studies, such as, socio-economic and land use classification surveys; rainfall data; and briefings on the CS trials in general. (Table 1 presents a training outline). As part of the training each changwat RAT team met separately to use these tools to examine data and to make preliminary plans for the assessments in their respective changwats. In general the agencies were uncomfortable with the semi-structured interview (SSI) techniques promoted in the orientation. So rather lengthy questionnaires were developed around the key questions:

- * What is your existing cropping system?
- * Why do you do as you do?
- * How would you like to improve on it?
- * Would you like to participate in on-farm trials to improve it?

Each changwat RAT team was composed of three field level DOAE staff, including: SMS, KA, TEA plus an assistant TEA along with one or two central level officials; at least two DOA staff from the principal experiment station responsible for NERAD and a central level person; one or one OAE staff from Bangkok and one from a zone office; one to two CPD staff from the changwat and/or amphur; one DLD official from a local station and one from Bangkok; a Field Manager (FM) and his assistant from NEROAC along with the Deputy Project Director; one or two professors from KKU; and a member of the Technical Assistance (TA) Team or the USAID Project Officer--for a total of about 15 or 16 people on the team.

TABLE 1. Summary of RAT II Training Agenda

- DAY 1 : CS Decision-making framework
 Progress of 1983 trials
 * Sub-groups discuss & present lessons learned
 * Discuss proposed trial modifications
 Principal Village Strategy
 Water Resources subject matter background
- DAY 2 : Topics and tools
 * Issues vs. questionnaires
 * Crop calendars
 * SSI techniques & tools
 Discussion by groups
 * Issues
 * Key questions
- DAY 3 : Presentation of Guidelines for SSIs
 Finalize RAT strategy
 * CS PV1 issues/techniques
 * CS PV2 issues/techniques
 * WR PV1 issues/techniques
 Plan 1984 RATs (by changwat)
 * PV schedules
 * Tools & techniques to be used
 * Assignment to sub-groups
 * Daily interview schedules/plenary sessions
 * Materials to be prepared
 * Travel & accomodations arrangements

Once the RAT teams arrived in their changwats, the first day was taken up in examining all the data and arriving at some tentative hypotheses about the existing cropping systems, problems and needs, and potential solutions. They revised their questionnaires developed in the training. Logistics, schedules, and sub-group breakdowns were made for the next 2-3 days of interviewing.

In general the RAT team would divide into groups of 3 or 4 per group to interview either a single farmer to obtain his individual experience, or a key informant, such as the kaset mubaan or the headman, to elicit more of a village-as-a-whole perspective. Each group would interview two farmers per day. Each group was to be composed of members from different agencies (and/or disciplines). A leader and secretary of each group was designated. At the end of each day there would be a plenary session where each group would rationalize what they had observed that day and they report it to the whole RAT team. The team would then revise their hypotheses in light of the information gathered that day and adjust the questionnaires accordingly. The next day there would be another iteration of interviewing, and with increased understanding a

revision of hypotheses and subsequent questionnaires. This continued until the fourth day, on which the team would meet to determine constraints, problems, and needs and plan subsequent field trials which might solve or ameliorate them. Then on approximately the fifth day the team would return to meet with villagers to review the conclusions of the assessment as to needs and opportunities, and jointly consider the proposed planned CS trials. The Revisions would be made in accord with farmer input.

After the assessments were completed, all four RAT teams met to consider the findings and proposed trials in response to farmers' needs and problems. They tried to analyze the organizational, budgetary, personnel and methodological constraints before submitting it to their agencies for approval. Once these proposals were approved by the Project, and subsequently by the respective departments, the RAT teams returned to the PVs to discuss the proposals in detail and make any necessary adjustments in the plans. Based on certain criteria, farmer-cooperators were selected for the trials on the various planned cropping patterns.

4. KEY LESSONS LEARNED

1) Most of the members of the RAT teams at first were uncertain about the veracity of semi-structured interviewing (SSI). They feared that without detailed questionnaires they would be unable to elicit the proper information. But as they experienced the "unwieldy" lengthy questionnaires and the dearth of information at the end of the day, they leaned towards shorter more open ended questionnaires. They became more comfortable, with more mindful interviews, where they used such tools as crop calendars or maps to "prompt" both themselves and farmers. By the end of the second RAT for 1984 CS trials, long, formal questionnaires were no longer an issue. However, there is still a tendency among a few to see the questionnaire as an end in itself--rather than a means to an end.

2) The perception of the legitimacy of these existing systems and the rationale of farmers' strategies, gave most of the teams a new appreciation for the indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) of the farmers. To some of the more perceptive, the realization of a capacity for experimentation already exists within some of the farmer-cooperators, and if their input is sought in the technology adaption process, the CS trials will necessarily have to meaningfully utilize these experiences.

3) The RATs were only the beginning of a community-based information systems. Information generated from them were used not only for cropping system trials but also for planning of water resource use activities and most importantly for tambon planning. However, opportunities were lost by not viewing the RAT as an opportunity to continually dialog with the farmers as a team throughout the growing period of the trials in order to enhance mutual understanding.

4) There is yet much difficulty for team member to conceptualize, let alone operationalize, *interactions* within and among the physical, biological, and social systems. There was difficulty in conceiving of temporal or spatial information within a systems approach. For example, many times farmers previous year's experiences of farmers were elicited instead of looking at the evolution of the cropping system over time.

5) After an initial period of adjustment different departments and disciplines worked together fairly well. However, younger and less tenured officials tended not to participate towards the end of the RATs-acquiescing to the elder or more educated team members. Thus, perhaps a good deal of information from those who are closest to farmers was lost.

6) RATs are not data but information gathering exercises. They are not substitutes for more formal surveys. They are not an excuse to be "quick and dirty" or to do what Chambers calls "development tourism". Many times RATs generate hypotheses that cannot be answered in a rapid assessment but in a formal survey. An example of this is quagmire that the project has fallen into with water resources development. After a water resource RAT and activities implemented, a formal survey was required to answer some of the questions raised in implementation. Now it seems as though, another RAT is required to move ahead.

7) Allow plenty of time for team interactions. Time gained by short circuiting these team interactions is not time "saved".

8) The context of the use of the RRA is of utmost importance. The purpose and resources available determine how the exercise should be implemented.

9) Although only two RATs were implemented most people in the Project realize their value and are asking for more in the areas of water resource use, common land management, and marketing.

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