Rapid Appraisal Methods
By Subhrendu K. Pattanayak

Rapid appraisal methods are 'quick and dirty', low-cost methods for gathering information, that lie somewhere along the continuum of data collection options ranging from informal short field visits & casual conversations to census, surveys, or experiments. While most of us have been exposed to procedurally precise, highly structured, systematic surveys or experiments at some point in our lives – either as respondents, enumerators or designers, many of our activities on study tour, such as the one to Ghana, would fall into the category of ‘rapid appraisals’ (RA) even though we aren't formally appraising specific issues.

These methods emerged in the 1970s in the field of social anthropology so that urban professionals and outsiders could learn about agricultural systems. The methods emphasize the importance and relevance of situational local knowledge, and of getting the big things broadly right rather than achieving spurious statistical accuracy. The methods utilize a style of listening research, and a creative combination of iterative methods and verification. The most well know verification strategy relies on “triangulation” of data from different sources, *i.e.* using two different methods to view and confirm the same information. As you can imagine, RA methods can quickly and cheaply generate a comprehensive picture of the situation at hand only if they are administered by highly trained and skilled professionals, who compensate for the speed and cost savings through a wealth of experience and knowledge. Some of the most common examples of rapid appraisals include: key informant interviews, focus groups, direct observations, community surveys or workshops, and mini-surveys.

1. **Key informant** interviews typically constitute talking to 15-25 knowledgeable and diverse experts from the study area. These interviews are semi-structured, qualitative in nature, and essentially in-depth discussions.
2. **Focus groups** comprise of discussion among 8 – 12 individuals, who constitute a homogeneous group, regarding issues and experiences of interest to the researcher. A moderator introduces the topic, facilitates and stimulates discussion, and avoids domination by a few.
3. **Community interviews** are similar to focus groups in purpose, except that they typically conducted at a public meeting and involve an extensive amount of interaction between the participants and the interviewers (often through Q & A). This type of group-wide data collection is sometimes better accomplished in a ‘workshop’ setting.
4. **Direct observations** essentially involve teams of observers recording what they see, hear and experience into a pre-specified detailed observation form. The observations could relate to objects, structures, processes, activities or even discussions.
5. **Mini-surveys** comprise of structured but short (1-2 page) questionnaire (usually including close-ended questions) that is administered to 25-75 individuals using non-probability sampling strategy.

Figure X presents a brief summary of the uses, strengths, and limitations of these methods. The methods are often complemented (or even substituted) by one or more of the following: (a) review of secondary sources (including aerial photos, even brief aerial observation), (b) foot transects, (c) familiarization and participation in activities, (d) mapping and diagramming, (e) biographies, local histories and times, (f) ranking and scoring, (g) rapid report writing in the field.

The strengths of RA methodologies include the fact that they are (a) cheap, (b) quick, (c) flexible, and (d) contextually and evidently rich. Their primary weaknesses are that they produce results are (a) unreliable or potentially invalid, (b) not generalizable to the large population, and (c) not sufficiently rigorous and credible for key decision-makers. Thus, they are best used in situations that require only:

1. qualitative, descriptive information
2. assessment of attitudes and motivations
3. interpretation of quantitative data from surveys and experiments
4. suggestions and recommendations
5. questions, hypotheses and approaches to be tested by surveys and experiments

Additional readings
Rapid Rural Appraisal
By Amanda Rogers

Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) is an efficient and effective method (both in terms of time and cost) of gathering information, particularly in agricultural settings. RRA, which emerged in the 1970s, places emphasis on local knowledge and the "big picture," instead of lengthy statistical analysis.

RRA is based on a number of findings. Formal or conventional ways of gathering information often do not result in timely, cost-effective and reliable information. In addition, brief and unstructured visits to local areas often result in biases. Furthermore, the quantity and quality of information gathered is often determined by attitudes and behavior of local people.

Techniques of RRA include:
- Direct observation
- Informal interviews
- Mapping and diagramming
- Local histories and case studies
- Short questionnaires
- Rapid report writing in the field

Characteristics of good RRA include:
- Building rapport with all groups of local people.
- Avoidance of placing local people in uncomfortable situations
- Using local activities and events to make direct observations rather than staging activities.
- Conversations which result in a 2-way exchange of information.
- Selecting RRA techniques in a manner to suit local circumstances.
- Checking the validity of information with a variety of sources.

Potential drawbacks of RRA include:
- Viewed as a replacement for all other methods of study.
- Time consuming (if done properly.)
- Viewed as a shortcut and therefore rushed.
- Disruptive to social routines.
- Biased toward individuals who may appear to have knowledge or toward those that have the time or motivation to talk.

Sources:

***
Our broad theme is multiple-use of Ghanaian forests, and more specifically the interactions among production of goods (e.g., timber, fuelwood/charcoal, bushmeat/fish) and services (eco-tourism, water quality) from forests of different ecotypes (mangrove, dry forest, moist tropical forest), tenure systems (government, community, private), and management (to be fleshed out during trip).

Specific case studies will include ecotourism development of the Afadjato community forest (in the Upper Volta) and certification of Portal’s forest management area (in the southwest). Recognizing that the appraisal methods are qualitative rather than strictly quantitative and that the process involves more ‘art’ than science, please use the following guidelines as just that.

1. Direct observation guide:
Take mental notes on forest products being collected, transported, or sold and record:
(i) when (early morning, morning, afternoon, evening),
(ii) where -- region of Ghana and specific location (e.g., with respect to highways, paved road in towns, dirt road, or foothpath),
(iii) who (gender, age, any other information), and
(iv) what (species, degree of processing, packaging, volume).
Watch for sale or transportation of timber (e.g., on logging trucks), bushmeat/fish, or fuelwood/charcoal; also note any other forest products being extracted, transported, or sold.

Notice how the forest is used:
(a) who is in the forest (tourists, guards, researchers, local people),
(b) what evidence is there of forest use (number and wear of trails, cut branches and trees), and
(c) how far forests are from streams, ponds, tanks and rivers.

See the forest through tourist eyes: What is most appealing? What diminishes your experience? What interesting things have you learned that could be somehow displayed or interpreted for tourists? Do you notice evidence of forest product extraction? How is this treated by guides/hosts? (Record both for forests that you visit and for the landscape that sets the backdrop for stops and drives.)
2. Mini-Interview guide
Note, while you should try to cover the broad questions discussed in this section, do not stick to the script too closely. Add things as you make your way across Ghana. Use a similar set of questions to interpret and engage with ‘experts’ and community representatives.

1 Forest products and services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>bushmeat</th>
<th>fuelwood</th>
<th>timber</th>
<th>tourism</th>
<th>water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forest provides (yy/y/n/nn)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affects supply of other forest benefits (+/-/0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My family sells or earns income from (yy/y/n/nn)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is culturally important (yy/y/n/nn)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is most important to me and my family (rate 1,2,3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is most important to Ghana (rate 1,2,3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: you could use the following questions to fill in the table above.
- Do people get {bushmeat, fuelwood, timber} from the forest? OR Does this {bushmeat, fuelwood, timber} come from forest? What else comes from that forest ...
- Do tourists visit the forest?
- What are other benefits of the forest?
- If doesn’t mention water, ask if forest protects rivers, streams, and water sources?
- If agree, what is the use of that water? (drinking, fishing, etc.)
- How does this use affect what else you can get from the forest? For example, when bushmeat is harvested, does that have positive (+), negative (-) or no (0) impact on fuelwood, timber, tourism, water?
- Which of these outputs from the forest is most important to you and your family personally?
- Do you sell any of these products? To whom?
- If these had to be bought, which do you think would cost the most?
- Which of these outputs is most important for Ghana’s development or future?

2 Forest (area being discussed, or source of product being discussed)
   a) Ecotype:__________  
   b) Region:__________  
   c) Secondary forest? ________  
   d) Accessibility (how far from road, town, etc.) __________

3 Who officially (legally) owns the forest? Who decides who can use the forest for what? What happens if someone or something not allowed takes place in the forest?

4 If this forest were not protected or managed for these products, what would the land be used for? Who would prefer that the land be used this way?

5 Record respondent’s: (a) Gender ______ (b) Age ______ (c) Position ______ (d) Ethnic group ____________, and (e) Employment ________

6 Record interview details: (a) Date and time ____________, (b) Location ______, (c) Proximity to highway, paved road, dirt road, footpath ____________, and (e) Your name ________________

3. Mini-interview guide for tourists (can be adapted for anyone who works in tourism sector)
1. How long are you spending in Ghana on this trip?
2. Have you visited any forests (as a specific destination)?
   If not, do you plan to visit any forests? Then go to Q#9
3. Which forest areas have you visited? (e.g., Kakum). Pick one forest area visited and ask
4. What did you like most about this forest? Please give a few specific examples.
5. Did the forest seem pristine? For example, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is untouched and 5 is heavily
   used by people, how would you rate the forest?
6. Did you notice how local people use the forest? Did your guide explain anything about this? If not
   mentioned, ask specifically about bushmeat, fuelwood, and timber.
7. From your perspective, is it better to see a forest that looks pristine and untouched or better to see a
   forest that is being used? That is, which do you find more appealing?
8. Did you notice any streams or other water bodies in the forest? Were these important part of the visit?
   Did the water seem clean to you? Why or why not?
9. Is visiting and observing nature one of the main reasons for your trip to Ghana?
10. Did your experience in Ghana and in the forests match your expectations? How was it similar or
    different?
11. Have you visited other countries in Africa?
12. Which country are you from?
13. What do you do there (what is your job)?
14. Interviewer: Note gender and approximate age