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1. **BACKGROUND:**

Rapid assessments are short, rigorous, team-based investigations to evaluate specific programmes. The assessment is done using various iterative modes of data collection and community participation to ensure a quick and holistic understanding of the programme.

The techniques of rapid assessments are derived primarily from the traditions of ethnography, action research and participatory action research. In comparison to traditional ethnographic methods, in which extended immersion in a cultural context is the norm, Rapid Assessments are more time efficient, cost effective and pragmatic. The strength of Rapid Assessment is that it can be integrated into practical outreach work because of its small scope. This way it can reach many people who do not normally respond to surveys.

Since the 1980s, rapid assessments have been used in to study various public health problems such as sexually transmitted infections in Russia, drug use in South Australia, tuberculosis in South Africa as well as to study the programme needs of the urban poor in Bangladesh and Tanzania.

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| **VOCABULARY TIP** While conducting rapid assessments, academicians, organisations and countries use different terminologies to define the assessment process. Here is a brief overview on the various terms used to describe rapid assessments: * Real Time Evaluations (RTE) - Real-time evaluations were developed by the UNHCR in the 1990s in response to the proliferation of humanitarian crises. RTEs are initiated as soon as a new crisis emerges or appears imminent. Typically, RTEs use a mixed-methods approach, involving semi-structured interviews, site visits, focus groups, and reviews of secondary documentation.
* Rapid Feedback Evaluation (RFE) - It was created by Prof. Joseph S. Wholey and it involves the use of existing data to make a quick preliminary assessment of the program’s performance. RFEs are likely to be employed in situations where program managers have either tightly focused questions about program performance or have identified a problem with program operations and need more information to decide how to correct the problem.
* Rapid Assessment (RA) - In this method, teams of researchers are deployed to gather information from small samples of key informants and local residents using surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Existing data sets are also studied to provide a more comprehensive picture of the problem. The primary purpose of an RA is to quickly generate information to assist decision making.
* Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (REA) - It was developed to provide quick assessments of local conditions and to design effective interventions. The major focus of an REA is on public health in developing nations. REAs tend to use a limited range of research methods and focus exclusively on exploring indigenous understandings of health issues.
* Rapid Evaluation Method (REM) - It was developed by the World Health Organization for assessing the quality of health care services, identifying operational problems, and assisting different methods. Despite the number of data collection methods used, REM research teams are still able to rapidly collect, analyse and report data.
* Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) - Employed principally in developing countries, a PRA is used to empower rural communities by ensuring that local people generate, analyse, own and share the research data. PRA adopts a variety of methods for collecting data such as oral histories, mapping and modelling of local conditions and semi-structured interviews.

Key difference between the assessment/appraisal (RA, REA, and PRA) and evaluation (RTE, RFE, and REM) methods is that the former typically focus on assessing an issue within a defined geographic area while the latter tend to focus on projects, programs, or systems. F or example, rapid assessments have been used to study HIV transmission patterns in particular cities while rapid evaluations have been done to study an HIV health care intervention in multiple countries. Despite this difference, the two methods share several commonalities and there has been enough cross-fertilization to ensure that the contrasts should not be overdrawn. **In order to avoid any confusion, this report will be using the term Rapid****Assessments as an all-encompassing category**.  |

1. **FEATURES OF RAPID ASSESSMENTS:**
* **Speed** - Rapid Assessments can dramatically reduce the time taken to conduct accurate and reliable research. This speed is achieved by adopting innovative methods of planning, managing and analysing the collected data. For example, the time taken during final data analysis can be significantly reduced by using interview summaries rather than traditional interview transcripts and by conducting daily end-of-the-day field meetings to discuss, analyse and summarize the data collected
* **Iterative Data Collection** - The iterative nature of Rapid assessments involves a flexible process in which semi-structured interviews and direct observations are adopted to discover the unexpected. This is achieved through a daily cycle of collecting data via open-ended questions, analysing it to find new information, and on the basis of the analysis, planning what to examine next.
* **Teamwork** - Rapid Assessments are always done in teams consisting of both “insiders” who have extensive knowledge of the local language, customs, and community members, and “outsiders” who have prior technical knowledge and experience in Rapid Assessments. Teamwork facilitates a Rapid Assessments’ intensive cycle of daily data gathering, analysis and summarization, which ensures that towards the end of the evaluation, most of the data analysis has already been done.
* **Practicality -** Rapid Assessment is designed to in that its scope is narrowed to a specific set of topics that directly inform the intervention. RAs do not focus on big, general questions such as, “What attitudes and beliefs do people have about HIV and AIDS?” Instead, the questions are modified to address specific programmatic issues like “What attitudes and beliefs about HIV and AIDS in this community may prevent people from seeking prevention and testing services?”
* **Local participation** - A major aspect of rapid assessment and evaluation is active and meaningful community participation. This helps the assessment address the issue of a lack of community involvement and input in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of local development programmes. Local participation can significantly improve and expediate the process of data collection and analysis.
1. **Distinct Characteristics of Rapid Assessment Process (RAP)**
* **Action Oriented:** Information gathering through RAP is specifically geared to programme improvement, problem solving, decision making, and extension of experience. This explicit focus casts the data gathering process in a pragmatic light. Rapidity is important in this context. If findings are to be used to modify actions, it is useful to obtain the information before the questions are forgotten or while decision makers remain highly motivated.
* **Investigative:** It attempts to discover new information or find new interpretations in addition to testing hypotheses. It attempts to discover not only what is happening but why it is happening, or in some instances, not happening. It looks both for the anticipated and the unanticipated. The process allows the evaluator to follow leads, check discrepancies, and obtain many different viewpoints from which a holistic picture can emerge.
* **Process Oriented:** It analyses not only the end results but the process of getting there. It attempts to discern the facilitating factors and the constraints.
* **Assesses Situations Holistically:** The process looks at many angles of a situation from many perspectives. It places problems in context; most quantitative assessments by their nature tend to be reductionist, looking at a limited number of variables. RAP also seeks to look at interactions, patterns and evolution over time.
* **Derives Confidence:** from the fact that multiple key informants are involved. By piecing together information and insights from various informants RAP team members are likely to obtain a "true" picture. Key informants include a broad range of people - policy makers, managers, service providers, both within and outside the sector - and most importantly beneficiaries are also principal key informants.
* **Places Great Importance on “Informed Consent”":** It attempts to ensure that judgements will be informed by putting emphasis on observing, describing, listening, and getting different viewpoints. It encourages arriving at collective judgements, often by consensus.
* **Efficient:** by emphasizing optimum use of existing data, and collecting and analysing available information and documentation. RAP may include multiple techniques - qualitative and quantitative.
* **Emphasizes the Use of Interdisciplinary Teams:** Because perceptions and interpretations are often conditioned by disciplines, RAP emphasizes bringing together experienced observers with different backgrounds and expertise. We put great importance on assembling a team with multiple skills and identifying a team leader good at facilitating interaction and coordination.
* **Includes “Insiders” and “Outsiders”:** We find it useful in most teams to include both. The insiders, familiar with the project or programme, bring in-depth knowledge, comment on practicality of recommendations and above all are more likely to use recommendations if they have been involved in the RAP. Outsiders on the other hand, specialists familiar with the field or country or culture, can bring fresh, less biased perspectives.
* **Facilitates Community Involvement:** All members of the community are viewed as potential informed observers and can be drawn into the investigative process. Open ended interviews allow people to express opinions, offer suggestions, make recommendations. "Listening and learning" are emphasized. The process is interactive. Findings and recommendations are presented and discussed with programme planners and implementers so their views can be taken into consideration. The process promotes dialogue.
1. **WHEN TO USE RAPID ASSESSMENTS:**
* To make a simple assessment of the functioning of a project, the services it provides and the problems in its implementation, given limited time and money
* To gather descriptive information for decision-making
* To interpret existing quantitative data
1. **ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF RAPID ASSESSMENTS:**

**Advantages:**

* Very cost effective
* Very useful for when time is limited
* Excellent for interpretation of complex socio-economic phenomena or processes
* Provide greater flexibility, than formal assessments, to explore new ideas and issues that aren’t anticipated before the study

**Disadvantages:**

* Sample respondents aren’t selected via Probability Sampling, thus, sample may or may not be representative of the entire population
* Interviewer/ Observer biases may occur due to open-ended and flexible research instruments
* Difficult to objectively record, code, and analyse qualitative data
* Not useful for evaluations requiring formal surveys and statistical analysis
* Full team of trained evaluators is required
* Lesser precision and generalizability than more structured assessments

**Ways to tackle disadvantages:**

* Use a well-articulated conceptual framework, which is often, but not necessarily, empirically grounded to ensure external validity
* Employ strategies used in ethnographic investigations to minimize the element of bias during the collection and analysis of data.
* Employ trained personnel to conducting survey.
* Try to use more than one Rapid Assessment method to cross check the collected data
* Address the problem of subjective bias by critically scrutinizing your own procedures
* To ensure active participation of decision makers at several key stages
1. **STEPS INVOLVED IN A RAPID ASSESSMENT**

**Step 1: Define *Objective of the Rapid Assessment***

The efficiency of the rapid assessment is dependent on among other factors, a concrete, clearly defined objective of the assessment. The questions in the objective should be specifically designed to study programme improvement, problem solving, or decision making.

**Step 2: *Secondary Data Collection & Analysis***

* Before commencing secondary data collection, it is imperative that the investigation team reviews and analysis existing data on the subject being assessed***.***
* A Secondary Data Report should be prepared to summarize the findings of the collected secondary data so as to avoid collecting data in the field which has already been satisfactorily found out by others.
* Common sources of secondary data include –
* National, state and district level survey data
* Routinely Conducted Evaluations
* Previous Annual or Special Reports
* Bibliographical Databases
* Hand- Searching Key Journals
* Relevant Conference Abstracts
* Reference Lists for Relevant Papers
* Indicative **Checklist** for the Secondary Data Report –
1. Objective of the Secondary Data Collection
2. Sources of Secondary Data
3. Results & Findings
4. Recommendations & Suggestions for Primary Data Collection
5. References
* **How to Make Secondary Data Collection & Analysis Rapid** –
1. Collect data first on national level followed by state and district level
2. Look for important and relevant quantitative information, e.g. census, health-statistics, demographic data, etc.
3. Use snowball effects by reviewing the references in reports and documents
4. Ensure that only quality data is being taken into consideration
5. Avoid confusion in data by providing definitions for potentially confusing or sensitive terms as well as for technical terms
6. Involve experts during data collection and analysis
7. Ensure there is enough time to turn data into information

**Step 3: *Systems Perspective via Local Participation***

* Since rapid assessments are designed to provide a quick insider’s view on complex issues or systems, it is essential to begin by first understanding what the participants of that system believe to be its critical elements, their relative importance and how they relate to each other.
* To gain this system’s perspective in an efficient manner, the assessment team should split into multiple disciplinary teams and spend a day on-site, to interact with relevant local organisations in an informal manner.
* To gather information for a system’s perspective teams may use semi-structured interviews and informal group discussions/meetings.
* Avoid the use of structured questionnaires. At this initial stage, it is essential to get a broader understanding of local conditions, behaviours, attitudes and concerns pertinent to the assessment.
* Finally, a System’s Perspective report is prepared to briefly summarize the data collected in the interviews and discussions.
* The report will inform the final assessment design and methods to be used for primary data collection.
* Indicative **Checklist** for System’s Perspective Report –
1. Brief background on the system being studied
2. Sources of data for the system’s perspective
3. Findings based on local interactions
4. Rapid Assessment Study Design and Timeline
5. Final Methods of Primary Data Collection
6. Team compositions and details
7. Resources Required
8. Potential Challenges to Avoid
* **How to Make the System’s Perspective Rapid:**
1. To save time and money, extensive notes should be taken during these interviews following which, the data should be analysed on the same day.
2. This report should be based on triangulated data from the Secondary Data Report and indigenous knowledge gained via interviews.

**Step 4: *Preparation for Primary Data Collection***

* **Team Composition**
1. Rapid assessments can’t be done by one person.
2. The team should comprise individuals from a range of disciplines, relevant to the assessment, for effective triangulation of information.
3. Teams should be a good mix of ‘insiders’ with knowledge and experience of local conditions and ‘outsiders’ with technical skills.
4. Smaller teams are recommended in order to not intimidate the responders
5. Team Composition:
* Team Coordinator: They will monitor the overall quality of the assessment and conduct final compilation and analysis of data.
* Team Leader(s)/ Team Interviewer: They will lead the field team, conduct interviews, work closely with other team leaders and contribute to compilation and analysis of the day’s collected data.
* Transcribers: There should be at least 2 transcribers, preferably selected from the local community to ensure efficient and detailed data collection and analysis.
* Translator(s): If required, each team leader will have a translator identified from the local community who will be briefed on his/her role in the assessment and on the codes of conduct.
* Driver(s): Drivers will be identified within the organization or on a contractual basis and will be briefed on the purpose of the assessment and codes of conduct.
* **Design Short, Simple Direct Observation /Key Information Interview/FGD Questionnaire as per the objective of the Research**
1. Developing the short, simple Direct Observation/KIIs/FGD questions such that it consists of questions that:
* are simple and straightforward, using common words that have concise and (if possible) unique meanings;
* are relevant to the Research objectives;
* do not contain the same information twice
* do not lead the respondents to certain answers
* use the mother tongue of the respondent.
1. Orient the personnel about the questionnaire who engaged in the assessment study to collect data during actual data collection.
* **Communication**
1. Mobile Phones : Each member should have one charged phone with adequate credit in it
2. Communication Channel: A clear line of communication should be established in case of security concerns and for general queries.
* **Supplies**
1. Multiple copies of the Assessment Forms/Questionnaire for each team
2. Sufficient water and refreshments for the day in each car
3. Identification cards/badges for team members
4. A clipboard for the Assessment Form
5. Adequate pens and notebooks for team members
6. A clear plastic folder to keep forms and papers
* **Local Authorization**
1. It is essential to have discussions with local authorities beforehand, in order to obtain local support and necessary security clearances

**Step 5: *Primary Data Collection***

* The main methods of primary data collection for a rapid assessment are -
1. Focus Group Discussions
2. Key Informant Interviews
3. Structured Direct Observations
4. Informal Surveys
* These methods are routinely deployed in evaluations as stand-alone ways of data collection. However, in a rapid assessment, they are all simultaneously conducted in order to reap the benefits of triangulation and to save time and money
* Common Structure for the Interviews:
* Start the session with a brief introduction of the interviewers and the objectives of the assessments in order to make the respondent/respondents comfortable.
* Stress on the confidentiality and anonymity of the responses, to gain the trust of the respondents.
* Start with easy questions to ease the respondents into the assessment
* Ask open ended questions
* Respect the informant’s views
* Be flexible with the pre-determined questions and allow a natural flow in the discussion
* Depending on how much information is required, don’t hesitate to probe the respondents
* Approach sensitive issues in a gradual manner
* Avoid group pressure by taking a poll on a question, asking specific people for their opinions or asking the group for specifically differing opinions and new ideas
* Pausing briefly allows participants to think more deeply on an issue
* End the session by summarizing the discussion and highlighting key insights
* Finish with an informal chat and thank your respondents for their time and insights
* Details of the methods of primary data collection are as follows:
1. **Focus Group Discussions –**
* Focus group discussions are conducted to discuss a specific topic in several sessions with different groups. Participants discuss issues, experiences and insights in an informal manner and they are free to comment, criticize, or elaborate on each other’s views.
* The discussion comprises around 6-12 participants, a moderator and more than one scribe for note-taking.
* A session usually lasts 1-2 hours with a moderator introducing the subject, keeping the discussion going using subtle probing techniques and trying to ensure balanced participation by addressing questions to specific persons or taking a group poll.
* In order to avoid group pressure that leads to one idea dominating the discussion, the moderator can specifically ask for other ideas and explanations and the scribes can observe and note non-verbal cues.
1. **Key Informant Interviews –**
* Key informant interviews are conducted with community experts who have information about local beliefs and attitudes, as well as, knowledge experts who have specialized information and experience on the subject matter.
* The interviews are conducted in pairs, with one team member working as the interviewer and the other serving as the scribe.
* The interviews are usually conducted without a tape-recorder. Once the interview has been completed, the interview team electronically enters the notes of the interview to be shared with the rest of the research team.
* It is essential to stress that, key informants do not have to be well educated, professional, or community leaders. Sometimes the best key informants are from the most vulnerable groups who have critical first-hand information that program professionals do not have.
* In order to select a wide range of key informants, nominative sampling technique, whereby key informants nominate other interviewees who have differing views, can be adopted.
1. **Structured Direct Observations –**
* Direct Observations are employed to gather data based on well-designed observation forms/questionnaire, which are designed to take into consideration the nature of the subject/object to be observed. In most instances, direct observations are often triangulated with focus group discussion and key informant interview data to compare observed behaviour with stated behaviour.
* They are better conducted by a team of experts rather than a single individual. A team approach ensures lesser individual biases and more comprehensive data collection.
* It is imperative to make the observation forms with questions which are mostly objective, easy to follow and simple to mark.
* Examples of non-directive probes “Tell me more about...” “Take me through exactly what happens when you...” “Can you give me an example of…?” “Did I understand you correctly when you said…?” “Can you explain a bit more what you mean by…?” “Why do you think that is the case?” “Do you think everyone thinks that?”
* Interviewer must be properly trained in code of conduct and should be sensitive to respondents’ personal opinions.
1. **Informal Surveys –**
* Informal surveys are usually conducted on the basis of an open-ended questionnaire that permits respondents to answer questions in their own words.
* The interviewers enjoy considerable flexibility in asking questions and are not constrained by the given questionnaire.
* The sample size for these surveys usually ranges from 25 to 50 people, who are selected on the basis of noni-probability sampling techniques such as convenience sampling, in which respondents are interviewed in markets, shops, public meetings, organizations, and other places selected on the basis of easy accessibility.
* Informal surveys have similar features of a key informant interview but there are important differences between the two. First, key informants provide information about others but respondents in informal surveys answer questions about themselves. Second, while similar questions are asked to each respondent in informal surveys, different sets of questions are put to key informants of different backgrounds. Third, the number of respondents in key informant interviews is typically smaller than in informal surveys.
* **How to Make Primary Data Collection Rapid:**
1. The teams should be structured in such a manner that there are multiple smaller teams rather than a few big teams. This will ensure that many interviews can be conducted, the data collected and analysed simultaneously by many teams.
2. The objective of the rapid assessment should be clearly understood by all team members so that only relevant data is recorded for analysis.
3. Respondent interviews must be scheduled in a strategic manner to ensure maximum attendance and efficient usage of time.
4. The team should have a list of questions prepared beforehand, so as to save time during the interviews. However, it is of utmost importance to allow for flexibility during the course of the interview, in order to unearth and incorporate new insights. For observational data, it is recommended to include mostly objective questions.
5. Teams should remember to not collect too much, irrelevant or unreliable data.
6. The interviewer must pace the discussion keeping in mind the budgeted time.
7. A designated spot should be decided, on the field, for holding daily debriefs and discussions on the field visit.
8. Immediately after the discussions, the collected data should be analysed and recorded in a daily summary report.
9. A note should also be made on any changes that are required in the questions or the operations of the assessment
10. The team should structure the research time in such a way, that stipulates enough time for these daily discussions and analysis as well for preparation of the daily summary reports.
11. This process of iterated data collection greatly reduces the duration of final data analysis, as most of the data is already analysed during data collection.
12. After a significant number of interviews have been conducted, it is recommended to conduct and record cross-case comparisons. These comparisons aid in recognizing and analysing common themes and patterns across the interviews. This analysis will ultimately form an integral part of the final report and contribute to expediating the final data analysis.
13. During the daily data collection and analysis, it is important for the teams to incorporate the secondary data and systems perspective while understanding and reporting ground realities. This process of triangulation significantly reduces the time of assessment.

**Step 6: *Data Analysis***

* Due to the iterative nature of data collection, the analysis process is greatly expediated. The daily summary reports provide most of the analysis that informs the final analysis report containing overall findings and recommendations.
* Triangulation of data from secondary sources, interviews, observations and team discussions is an essential tool to reduce time for data analysis and to increase reliability of data.
* The use of clear and conscience assessment questions significantly contribute to a good analysis with limited time and money.
* The use of certain matrixes could reduce the time of analysis:
* S.W.O.T. Matrix for Policy
* Progress Tree and Objectives Tree
* Log frame

**Step 7: *Data Documentation***

* To speed up the process of documentation, each team member can be assigned a different set of assessment questions to write up.
* The primary author can then review each section and cross-check the final interpretations against the cross-case notes and daily summary reports case as an additional confirmability audit check.
* A PowerPoint presentation of the findings can then be presented to the field staff who cross-check the validity of the findings and allow the team to team to determine the accuracy of their conclusions.
* Finally, any key issues or suggestions that emerge from the PowerPoint presentation can be incorporated into the final report.
* Depending on the type of audience that will read it, the report can either be a 2 page summary in the form of a concise policy brief or a detailed policy report.
* Irrespective of the type, the Final Report should be easily readable and accessible.
* The report should start with the objectives and findings of the assessment while lesser important features such as details of the methodology used can be mentioned towards the end.
* An indicative **Checklist** for the detailed Policy Report:
1. Brief Background and Objective of the Assessment
2. Sources of Data
3. Findings including Strengths and Weaknesses of the Policy
4. Recommendations for Actions
5. Challenges to Overcome
6. Timeline and Names of Authorities for Actions
7. List of Acronyms
8. Methodology Used
9. References
10. **Way Forward:**

To conclude, rapid assessments were developed to fill the lacuna in quick, accurate and economical evaluation methods. It is indeed true that during decision making, timely and simple approximations are more beneficial and functional than precise but delayed results. In addition to providing fast and critical insights on public policies, rapid assessments, also allow for the exploration of unchartered territory, to unearth a rare insider’s view on social issues. However, it should be clear that rapid assessments are not a replacement of more formal methods of evaluation. Rather, they act as an excellent complimentary tool, for a holistic understanding of government programmes which are operating in the real world with limited time and money. As with any evaluation method, rapid assessments should be led by expert professionals in order to maintain quality and robustness of data.

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**RAPID ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT**

This toolkit has been prepared as a ready reference for M & E practitioners. Rapid assessments are short, rigorous, team-based investigations to evaluate specific programmes. The assessment is done using various iterative modes of data collection and community participation to ensure a quick and holistic understanding of the programme.

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