Editorial

Critical reflections on the practice of PRA

Irene Guijt and Andrea Cornwall

• Introduction

PRA is now widely used in development research and planning, training is taking place in all corners of the globe and PRA is becoming a routine demand in consultancy work. But whose interests does it serve and what has the impact been? What kind of local participation actually occurs in practice? And what is at stake for those involved? Does PRA lead to sufficient understanding of local contexts to advocate for action? Has PRA become a 'flag of necessity' (Richards, this issue) with which to seek funding? Or does its growing use represent a genuine willingness in organisations to seek reorientation and innovation? As the use of PRA spreads, such questions are increasingly being asked.

PRA has proven to be a powerful and often beneficial strategy for participatory development. Its widespread use in diverse contexts signals the extent of its appeal. And some of the results have been impressive. Using PRA has helped, in some settings, to:

- Empower marginalised communities and groups, by encouraging them to analyse local conditions, giving them confidence to assert their priorities, to present proposals, to make demands and to take action.
- Seek and enable the expression and integration of local social diversity in otherwise standard programmes.
- Pursue community-based processes for development, including appraisal, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Identify local priorities for research and initiate participatory research, with scientists becoming more receptive to local knowledge and recognising that farmers are able to design, conduct, and evaluate their own experiments.
- Encourage organisational changes, with a reorientation of government and university staff, CBO and NGO workers, and trainers towards a culture of open learning, moving away from top-down standardisation of procedures.
- Assist with policy review, both within organisations and governments, through new, timely, and more accurate insights from field-level discussions and planning.

Despite these and other positive changes, there remain many questions about the use of PRA. What has become clear is that the use of participatory methods alone does not guarantee participation in setting development agendas. Nor does it necessarily lead to empowerment, despite the claims sometimes made. Ironically, what grew out of a disillusionment with blueprint planning, and stressed flexibility and adaptive learning, is now in danger of being stifled again. In some settings, routine and prescribed procedures have begun to displace adaptation, innovation, and open-ended curiosity.

Some of the key areas of concern identified by PRA trainers and practitioners were expressed in *Sharing Our Concerns* (see *PLA Notes* 22). These included:

- the assumption that using PRA methods and/or approach in itself brings about positive change;
- lack of conceptual clarity, transparency and accountability;
- emphasis on information extraction with the rhetoric of political correctness;
- unchallenged assumptions of community harmony;

- lack of in-depth analysis which obscures awareness of political realities within communities;
- one-off training, with no follow-up by trainers or institutions;
- poor integration of PRA into project planning and implementation;
- lack of clarity about reasons for using PRA;
- agendas driven from outside the community, not from within; and,
- co-option of the acronym, making it a label without substance.

This issue of *PLA Notes* is devoted to much needed debate about these concerns. We bring together social anthropologists, policy makers, NGO development workers, economists, ecologists and trainers to reflect critically on the practice of PRA. The issue is divided into two sections. The first focuses on *PRA and Social Anthropology* while the second deals with *Politics and Practicalities*. The debates are complex, the perspectives varied, the issues immense. These diverse, and sometimes conflicting views are all also challenges, urging us to improve on what PRA has offered to date.

• Shared concerns, different perspectives

Reactions to PRA are rarely neutral. It is either glorified or vilified. Debates about PRA span a wide range of perspectives. How people assess PRA depends on their perceptions of the purpose of PRA and on where they stand in development debates in general. Their views stem in turn from their own experience and training.

A first step in understanding the range of concerns is to look at who is saying what. Lines are often drawn between academics and practitioners. This issue of *PLA Notes* challenges these divisions. We bring together practitioners and academics who work with and within NGOs, donor agencies, and university departments, with shared concerns about poverty and powerlessness but different views on PRA as practice.

Much of the debate focuses on the kind of knowledge that PRA generates and the ways it

is used. For some, the practice of PRA has come to represent superficial pseudo-science, a poor replacement for the 'real thing'. For others, PRA offers an exciting new approach that challenges conventional hierarchies by creating opportunities for people themselves to analyse and plan. Some see PRA as a cost-effective strategy for enhancing operational effectiveness. Others raise concerns about the use of PRA to co-opt people into projects devised by outsiders to serve their interests, without altering the balance of power. Many practitioners have come to PRA in search of a people-centred alternative to conventional practice.

These different perspectives partly stem from the history of PRA and its relatively recent debut. PRA is sometimes represented as a fusion of the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) with the methods of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA). The awkward relationship between these two quite distinct approaches has given rise to a range of interpretations.

Participatory Research developed during the 1970s with the radical goal of empowering people to fight oppression and claim the choices that were denied them. RRA arose in the early 1980s and aimed to improve the effectiveness of development planning and management. It grew from a *"managerial need to compress and rationalise learning"* (Mosse, this issue).

PRA was developed in the late 1980s by those seeking to use RRA for a different, people-centred approach to development research and planning. Two insights were of particular importance: (1) that local people are able to represent and analyse information about their own livelihoods and make their own plans, a process that was enhanced by the use of group-based visual analysis; (2) that this learning process can motivate the people involved, researchers, development workers and local people, to behave differently and undertake different kinds of action. By the early 1990s, it became apparent that this process can only happen through critical self-reflection on personal behaviour and attitudes.

PRA aimed to shift the focus to enhancing the capacity of local people to do it themselves.

Yet while its forerunner, Participatory Research, has explicitly sought wider societal change, the use of PRA has often remained locked into the contexts in which RRA was previously used. Its application has remained largely sector-focused and so fits within the existing hierarchy of planning, without seeming to challenge it.

Today people often use PRA as an umbrella term for a wide variety of applications. It is common to find development agencies, keen to put local people's empowerment on their agendas, using the label PRA while actually only using some diagramming methods to improve data collection. This is in essence RRA, as local people do not take part in setting priorities and determining how subsequent action may be taken. As long as barriers to change remain unaddressed in many institutional settings, the scope of participatory development work will continue to be limited (Guèye, this issue).

Views on PRA are, therefore, influenced by how people come to use it, be it primarily via the political agenda of Participatory Research or the practical agenda of RRA. PRA can serve as a means to a range of ends, depending on how practitioners define their purpose and according to what they mean by 'participation'.

• **Critical concerns**

Lack of a clear definition of PRA lies at the heart of many of the critical reflections in this *PLA Notes*. PRA has variously been described as an approach, a process, a methodology, an activity, a technique, a basket of tools, or a menu of methods. It is usually seen as a series of group sessions in public spaces, which may or may not involve separate activities with different interest groups and with individuals.

The uneven transition from RRA to PRA is further complicated by the adoption of the term 'participatory' as a fundable buzz word to cover all applications. In some cases, PRA has simply become the latest term to refer to any activity which brings people together for discussion. Even questionnaire-based work has been passed off under the label of PRA.

Is there and should there be a single definition of PRA? Such a question highlights a paradox. If PRA is intended to be a flexible, adaptive approach to learning and action, then static definitions which systematise its use may lead us back into the very situation that PRA arose in reaction to: established dogma and routinised practice. Definitions often boil down to questions of method, rather than methodology. One of the key strengths of PRA lies in the possibilities it offers for trying out new ways of doing things, adapting methods to new contexts. The principle of creative innovation is underpinned by commitment to principles of equity and empowerment, and to enabling people to express themselves in their own terms. Instead of struggling to agree on what PRA is, more of a focus is needed on how and for what or whom PRA is used.

Confusion over definitions is directly related to *confusion over objectives.* RRA and PRA rely on similar methods, but are generally used to pursue different objectives. RRA offers planners, researchers and project staff the tools with which to gain an understanding of local conditions, so as to feed these insights into programming or policy. At the local level, participants may play an active role in the collection and analysis of information. But agendas continue to be set elsewhere, offering local people limited opportunities to take part in decision-making and planning for themselves. With PRA, the emphasis is not only on local-level analysis by local people themselves, but also on enabling people to set their own agendas, pursue their own priorities and play a more prominent part in decision-making.

In practice, many applications lie somewhere between PRA and RRA, often through institutional constraints (Gosling, Mosse, this issue). Although the aim may be to use PRA for local-level planning and empowerment, the demand for data for internal, agency-level planning often takes precedence. Problems arise where this process is labelled 'PRA', as assumptions are then made about empowerment.

Arising as it does in part from RRA, PRA lives with the legacy of being associated with rapid data collection. And it is often still used in this way. But rather than condemning RRA, it is

3

vital to return to questions of purpose. Policy change may require strategies that appear 'extractive', but can ultimately bring wider benefits. And rapid data collection can be a stepping stone to more engaged work at the community level.

Different situations require different mechanisms at various stages for involving local people in the development process. Longer-term engagement involves shifts between different modes of participation, from structured processes that bring people together to collect information, to bargaining, negotiation and mediation as interests and conflicts emerge and as spaces are created for collective action (Shah and Kaul Shah, Mosse, this issue). 'Non-participatory' research may be required to assess the impact of participatory work, or to establish the conditions under which such work could have the greatest positive impact (Mosse, this issue).

Confusion over definitions, principles, and objectives has led to an *overemphasis on the importance of methods* (Guèye, Richards, Scoones, this issue). Guides, handbooks, manuals and resource books are mushrooming, fostering a Manual Mentality. While manuals themselves play an important role in learning and spreading good practice, they may lead to the mechanical, formula-like use of a standardised series of methods. In such cases, inadequate attention is paid to the process and to the implications of their use in different cultural settings (Robinson-Pant, Richards, this issue). Part of the problem lies in the kind of training that is delivered (Chambers, this issue) and in the assumption that training is the answer (Scoones, this issue).

Learning to use the methods is the easy part. Acquiring the skills of communication and facilitation with which to apply them is far harder. Exposure to PRA involves a learning process that is deeply challenging, on a professional and personal level (Shah and Kaul Shah, this issue). Many of those who are now being trained in PRA have spent much of their working lives in settings with rigid hierarchies. Participatory approaches to research and development actively challenge these boundaries and may be perceived by some as a threat to their status and even their job. As

many PRA trainers can testify, resistance often arises in training sessions as participants try to adapt to these new roles.

Even where participants begin to work in more interactive ways with local people, a preoccupation with methods and their immediate results (diagrams, reports, research agendas, plans) has led to a neglect of the contexts and interactions that give rise to these outputs. In many cases, the methods of PRA continue to be used to seek facts rather than to explore perspectives. Information is taken out of the complex social and micro-political contexts in which it arose. Different people, in different settings, may choose to represent their situations to facilitators and each other in different ways. A major challenge for trainees and practitioners is to try to understand this context better and to see that such social interactions are *part* of the 'data', and indeed influence what is and is not said (Cornwall and Fleming, this issue). Training needs to concentrate more on developing skills of observation and analysis, and on enhancing practitioners' and researchers' abilities to reflect on their own personal biases in order to recognise the influence they themselves have on outcomes (Cornwall and Fleming, Hinton, Mosse, this issue).

While PRA may have 'pilfered' from anthropology (Scoones, this issue), practitioners often lack the conceptual tools to make sense of the complex social and political contexts in which participatory research and development takes place (Richards, Mosse, Cornwall and Fleming). How can PRA be used to understand the complex social relationships which determine who is and is not present, and who does and does not speak up in community gatherings (Mosse, this issue)?

These issues raise further questions about the role of professionals in participatory development. Professionals cannot deliver empowerment. But they can create opportunities for people to empower themselves. Knowing what professionals bring to a PRA-based process (such as resources, long-term support, links with other organisations, and skills to resolve conflicts) can help communities change their expectations of such professionals and

4

establish the basis for partnership in local development.

This brings us to the sensitive area of *political positioning in participatory research and planning*. The practice of PRA is never neutral. Outcomes generate ideas and expectations, which agencies and individuals may be unable to meet (Gosling, Schreckenberg, this issue). Choices need to be made and sides taken, raising ethical and political dilemmas. If consensus is sought, whose interests are served and whose voices are heard (Pottier and Orone, Richards, this issue)?

Local political structures may, in themselves, prove to be the biggest obstacle for the empowerment of marginalised groups (Mosse, this issue). And when choices are made to work with the less powerful, what repercussions might this involve (Shah and Kaul Shah, de Koning, Appleton, this issue)? Are practitioners equipped to deal with some of the conflicts that PRA may expose or provoke (Shah and Kaul Shah, Appleton, Schreckenberg this issue)?

Shah and Kaul Shah make the important point that bringing about change requires not only sustained interaction but the willingness to take risks that may generate conflict. They note that often such risks are minimised where they might jeopardise the short-term goals of development institutions, resulting in the use of PRA for limited ends and little in the way of longer-term institutional change.

The politics of practice raise wider ethical questions about *the impact of PRA*. Concerns have been raised about the use of villagers as guinea pigs to change the attitudes of bureaucrats or to sensitise a research team. Local people may invest hours and days in a process that can leave them with high expectations. If this is not followed up, it can lead to disillusionment and anger. Yet often, the time and energy that people expend on PRA activities are taken for granted and the costs they incur underestimated.

While there is no lack of reports of short-term outputs, there is still little documentation of what takes place in the longer term. As Shah and Kaul Shah point out, much of what is written about PRA is the result of one-off or short-term assignments rather than reflections on intensive engagement with communities over time. In order to improve our practice, we need detailed accounts of the complex processes that take place in longer-term PRA-based work. The scarcity of such studies creates doubt about the effectiveness of participatory development work in achieving equity and empowerment (Richards, this issue).

In assessing the impact of PRA we need to look beyond whether or not it has produced more efficient programmes or enabled agencies to meet their objectives better. We might ask, with Richards, what perceptions participants themselves have of the purpose of PRA-based work. What impact do they feel it has had on the quality of their lives? What do they feel that they have gained from it? And what indicators would they themselves choose to assess changes?

The use of PRA is expanding on a vast scale (Chambers, this issue). While PRA is still regarded by some as a universal panacea for all development woes, others are addressing *questions of complementarity* with other methods and approaches. In some settings and for some purposes, conventional research methods may be more appropriate[2] (Schreckenberg, this issue). In others, PRA may be complemented by other approaches. Exploratory work using PRA may, for example, generate issues that require further investigation using conventional methods. For example, farmers may request the assistance of vets to diagnose and treat an epidemic in livestock. Or participant observation may be used to establish the basis for and to inform participatory work (Mosse, Hinton this issue). Ultimately, participation rests on questions about who sets the agenda and controls the process. As part of a process led and managed by local people, 'non-participatory' methods can complement PRA as means to ends defined by local people's priorities.

Issues of complementarity, then, bring us back to ends and means and raise further *questions about appropriateness*. Originally intended for and developed around micro-scale use at the community level, recent attempts to scale up and institutionalise PRA in large bureaucratic

_____

structures raise new issues (Backhaus and Wagachchi, Chambers, Guèye, this issue). The expansion of PRA training on a massive scale also raises pressing concerns (Chambers, this issue). Have those embarking on the introduction of PRA assessed the suitability of the institutional set-up for the slow process of decentralised, bottom-up planning?

How appropriate is PRA for macro-level planning or extensive micro-level planning? And what might be the consequences for flexibility and innovation? How can micro-level PRA processes feed into macro-level policy making? Can communities use PRA to negotiate with local government and other institutions? The mechanisms involved are relatively unexplored, yet vitally important (Johnson, this issue).

• **Challenges**

We have come full circle. PRA started as a critical response to the inadequacy of existing research and planning processes. Yet many of the concerns discussed here focus precisely on the inadequacy of local participation in the process. At its worst, the label 'PRA' has been used to describe forms of development that are little more than thinly veiled manipulation. But in other cases, the process itself has brought about tangible changes that open up opportunities for further, more extensive transformation. While institutional agendas often continue to determine how PRA is used, in some settings processes of institutional learning are taking place with far-reaching consequences.

PRA has made impressive gains and offers vast potential to contribute to sustained and positive change. If the potential of PRA is to be realised further, the concerns we raise here must be addressed. Facilitating and enhancing such change requires above all a new look at the original principles of PRA and a renewed commitment to them. By describing what we do, and not claiming to do what we do not or cannot do, much of the confusion can be avoided. By reflecting critically on what we do, we can learn from our mistakes and move forward. And by creating spaces to understand these issues better we may, perhaps, even find some answers.

- **Irene Guijt,** Sustainable Agriculture Programme, IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, UK, and **Andrea Cornwall,** Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK.

_____

1

Context and complexity: anthropological reflections on PRA

Andrea Cornwall and Sue Fleming

• Introduction

The use and abuse of RRA and PRA has attracted considerable criticism from social anthropologists. This section addresses some of the wider concerns that have been voiced about the practice of PRA, by practitioners and by academics working in development settings. The critical reflections offered by contributors to this section highlight issues of social and cultural complexity, difference and power, raising important challenges for practice[1].

• Questions of practice

Is PRA a genuine alternative to the use of 'expert' anthropologists as brokers of cultures and self-appointed representatives of 'local people'? Or is it merely *"quick and dirty"* anthropology on economists' terms' (Richards, this issue), a poor substitute for in-depth social analysis? Anthropologists have often been dismissive about PRA, viewing it as a hasty, superficial, approach; as 'short-cut' social science. Yet increasing numbers of applied anthropologists are using participatory approaches in their work. For them, as for many of those in mainstream development who have come to use it, PRA offers something new and different.

What *is* new and different about PRA? Two crucial distinctions need to be drawn in order to address this question. One is between the techniques and the approach itself. The other is between how something is done and what the underlying purpose is, between means and ends (Nelson and Wright, 1994). One

anthropologist mused, *"I suppose PRA is what we do anyway.*

It's just quicker". Many of the *methods* used in PRA are not new and anthropologists have long used similar techniques (Richards, Scoones, this issue). But their use with and by local people to facilitate their own analyses, generate their own solutions and plan for themselves offers a significantly different *approach* to their use by anthropologists.

Conventionally, the observations, analyses and conclusions of the anthropologist form the substance and outcome of anthropological research. Anthropologists make fieldnotes and take them away to analyse. They may use some of the methods now familiar in PRA, such as ranking. But rarely are people in the communities where the conventional anthropologist works given the opportunity to take part in representing and analysing their own situations. More rarely still are outputs shared or discussed with them.

PRA offers practitioners a different role, as facilitators of processes in which local people play a far more active role. Rather than treating people as the objects of study, the use of PRA enables them to take part in presenting their own information, drawing their own conclusions and offering their own analyses. As such, PRA can open up areas that were once the domain of external 'expert' anthropologists. But, as we go on to suggest, there are often shortcomings in terms of analysis. This is an area in which anthropologists have most to offer.

The crucial difference, then, lies not in techniques nor in the contexts in which they

are used. Rather, questions of practice arise from and return to questions of purpose. What ends are sought by researchers? For what and for whom are the outcomes of research intended? And by whom should it be carried out?

- ## Competition or complementarity?

If, as many PRA practitioners contend, *"local people can do it themselves"*, where does this leave the development anthropologist who is committed to action? Concerns about substitution are increasingly relevant (Richards, this issue). Used to generate 'short-cut' outcomes, PRA is no substitute for in-depth analysis. Yet again the question arises: analysis for and by whom? As Mosse points out, many development projects view long-term research as an unaffordable luxury. But understanding complex situations and facilitating real change 'from the bottom up' takes time, commitment and a longer-term engagement. Richards rightly identifies the attempt by donors to squeeze social analysis into tight schedules as part of the problem.

Perhaps part of the solution lies in exploring complementarities between anthropology and PRA as a longer-term process of action research. Internal critiques in anthropology have challenged the authority of anthropologists to speak for others. PRA offers development anthropologists ways to seek a different kind of engagement with local communities. Rather than displacing anthropologists, the practice of PRA can be enriched by their involvement at many levels, from critical reflections on methodology to facilitators of analysis (Mosse, Hinton, Scoones, this issue).

Locating social knowledge

A basic starting point for social anthropology has been to question assumptions about what people say or do. This has involved trying to understand local realities in local terms. It also means looking beyond people's public statements, to their actual practices, and the social context in which these statements and practices occur. PRA has drawn on anthropology to emphasise the importance of

local categories and classifications, the use of local materials and symbols, and the need to adapt methods to different cultural settings. However, analysis of the contexts in which PRA is practised is often weak. The mechanistic use of methods may produce 'data'. But this information, and its analysis, can be misleading without a sensitivity to how social interactions and settings shape the outcomes of PRA activities (Pottier and Orone, Hinton, Mosse, this issue).

The contributors to this section underscore the importance of understanding how social knowledge is created and used in PRA. One of the key strengths of PRA is the use of visualisation, as a means of communicating information and creating arenas for discussion and analysis. Diagramming can help to challenge ideas that are taken for granted. But visual representations, like the verbal discussions through which people interpret and analyse them, are never neutral (Mosse, Richards, Robinson-Pant, this issue). They cannot be simply read as 'facts'. What people think the purpose of a particular PRA exercise is, who is there and who takes part in it, where it takes place and what people perceive the potential outcome to be, all influence what participants choose to represent in diagrams. Taken out of context, diagrams can be interpreted in a range of different ways and can potentially lead to misleading conclusions (Richards, Robinson-Pant, this issue).

Although visualisation can give people greater scope to represent their own perceptions and priorities, some of the techniques, such as matrix scoring or Venn diagramming, transfer models that have been developed in particular cultural settings to others. While these techniques can have universal application for structuring discussion, if they are used only to generate products, rather than to stimulate analysis and debate, the form may in itself impose meaning. And although diagramming methods create spaces for people to participate in presenting information about their lives, the processes in which methods are used are not always in themselves 'empowering'. Robinson-Pant (this issue) draws on anthropological studies of literacy to consider the implications of PRA as a 'new literacy practice'. As with literacy, the techniques can be merely treated as tools that 'work' in any

_____

context to generate or convey information. However, processes that facilitate critical awareness require more than simply applying methods (de Koning, Robinson-Pant, this issue). Whether or not the use of PRA enables people to empower themselves depends more on the process and style of facilitation than on the methods themselves (Guijt and Cornwall, this issue).

Understanding social processes and interactions may appear to be an academic exercise that detracts from the real business of getting things done. But the importance of such an understanding is still underestimated. Mosse and Hinton show how the skills of participant observation and social analysis can be used effectively in PRA work to extend understanding of the social relationships between people and to set their interactions in context. These skills are increasingly relevant. But they are not exclusive to anthropologists. Greater sensitivity to process and context can be developed by improving the capacity of fieldworkers to observe, analyse and record the interactions that take place, as Hinton and Mosse show. Good practice demands that more attention is paid to building these skills.

- ## Developing reflexivity

Reporting on PRA-based work tends to focus on products. Few reports offer insights into the processes or the contexts in which diagrams and analyses were produced (de Koning, this issue). While PRA training has increasingly addressed attitudes and behaviour, the emphasis has tended to be on conduct and awareness of personal social biases. Less attention has been paid to how the practitioner's presence and their own ideas about what counts as knowledge influence the kinds of information produced in PRA exercises.

For anthropologists, reflexivity is about critical self-awareness; about the recognition that who we are as people and as political actors defines not only what we think is important but also our interactions with others. Encouraging reflection on processes and self-criticism through PRA training and practice is crucial. Opportunities need to be made to find out and raise questions about what people think

'development', 'participation' and 'empowerment' mean, and to create a culture of self-criticism among PRA practitioners.

But learning to 'embrace error' is not easy. Many people find it hard to admit mistakes, especially if it could threaten their employment and funding. The challenge of enabling the poorest to determine their own priorities and solutions can be deeply threatening, personally and professionally. The managerial skills needed to support this process are often overlooked, but are vitally important (Meera Kaul Shah, pers. comm.). It is easier to simply slot methods into routine procedures, treating them merely as means to ends that avoid the risk of challenging established interests (de Koning, this issue). These factors limit opportunities for institutional change, at any level (Shah and Kaul Shah, Guijt and Cornwall, this issue).

- ## Exploring complexity

One of the biggest challenges for practice in participatory development is to move beyond simplistic notions of 'the community' to address the social and political complexities of participation. Without an understanding of local social, cultural and political contexts, possibilities for genuine participatory action may be limited (Mosse, Richards, this issue). While analysis can lead to suggestions for action, action itself is always mediated by the social relationships between those who take part (Mosse, Shah and Kaul Shah, this issue).

Interpretations of what 'participation' actually involves can vary according to the way people make sense of social processes, as well as the local political contexts in which activities take place (Pottier and Orone, Richards, this issue). Local social theories can provide additional complexities for analysis, as participants and facilitators may have quite a different interpretation of the object of the exercise (Richards, this issue).

PRA is weak on appropriate methods for exploring social complexity (Mosse, Richards, Scoones, Pottier and Orone, this issue). It may be the case that to situate PRA in a wider social and political context requires not only better methods (Scoones, this issue), but also

_____ 3

_____

'non-participatory' ethnographic studies of the complex processes involved at every stage (Mosse, Richards, this issue).

Social anthropologists could play an important part in developing a critical understanding of the impact of PRA at the local level. Little work has been done to explore how local people view PRA. And even less is understood about what takes place in longer-term PRA-based work within communities. As PRA comes to assume a more central place within participatory development work, these issues are crucial for future developments in practice.

• In whose interests?

Much, but by no means all, PRA-based work aims to facilitate 'community participation'. But who are 'the community'? Whose realities are being represented? And how, without an understanding of social context, are PRA practitioners to know whose interests lie behind the 'community concerns' that are presented in public discussions (Pottier and Orone, this issue)?

Many practitioners of PRA assume that consensus is possible and/or desirable. Yet to take at face value the consensus that is created at the end of a short appraisal can potentially undermine the strategies of the least powerful. Even if people are given opportunities to speak, procedures may exist that favour the almost inevitable co-option of the process in the interests of the powerful (Richards, Mosse, Hinton, this issue). Can the practice of PRA ever take place outside local power structures? Conflicts between the various actors involved in PRA activities raise a number of dilemmas (Pottier and Orone, Appleton, Shah and Kaul Shah, this issue). Working towards equity and the empowerment of marginalised groups is a process that can generate, as well as expose, conflict. Conflicts may surface in different ways as the process moves from one stage to the next and every situation offers new complexities. One-off, extractive applications often ride roughshod over these issues, taking apparent compliance as consensus; and ignoring the relationships between the different actors involved. Without an understanding of the context and a commitment to longer-term, intensive,

engagement little meaningful change is possible (Guijt and Cornwall, Shah and Kaul Shah, this issue).

This raises wider political questions about whose interests the use of PRA serves. Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been used since the 1970s without attracting a similar level of interest and excitement (de Koning, this issue), perhaps precisely because it is directly concerned with wider political change. In the face of the extensive and rapid 'scaling up' of the use of PRA (Chambers, this issue), it may be appropriate to ask what the different actors and agencies involved in development mean by 'participation' and 'empowerment'.

PRA is rapidly becoming bureaucratised and routinised. This raises very real concerns about integrity. It also leads to questions about the compatibility of an 'empowering' approach with the agendas of some of the institutions and individuals that use it. PRA may offer tools for transformation, but as applications multiply the potential for manipulation and tokenism becomes ever more apparent. As reports of bad practice proliferate, questions need to be asked about whether the kinds of applications labelled as 'PRA' really increase the capacity of the poor to act in their own interest (Richards, de Koning, this issue). And, as Shah and Kaul Shah argue, using PRA in short-term excursions runs the risk not only of being counter-productive in the longer-term, but also of undermining the development of good practice.

• Conclusion

The issues raised here are critical. If PRA as a longer-term process of empowerment is to have a meaningful influence on mainstream development practice, radical institutional, personal and professional changes are necessary. Re-emphasising the 'P' in PRA and breaking free from the traps of dogma, orthodoxy and empty rhetoric requires renewed commitment to the basic principles with which the approach originated. This is a process to which anthropologists have much to contribute, as well as to learn. Anthropological concerns with reflexivity, social processes and context can help inform the practice of PRA

_____ 4

and enable practitioners to appreciate the complex realities of the urban and rural poor. The challenges PRA raises for anthropology take critiques from within the discipline further, opening up new possibilities for development anthropology (Hinton, Scoones, this issue).

- **Andrea Cornwall,** Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK, and **Sue Fleming,** Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester, Roscoe Building, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.

REFERENCES

Nelson, N. and Wright, S. 1994. Participation and power. In: Nelson, N. and Wright, S. (eds.) *Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice*. IT Publications, London.

2

Participatory rural appraisal: a quick-and-dirty critique

Paul Richards

• Introduction

Others may have different historical accounts, but to my knowledge debates about Participatory Rural Appraisal and Rapid Rural Appraisal (henceforth PRA/RRA) began with a workshop on RRA (in which I was a participant) organised in 1980 by Robert Chambers at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex. That workshop brought together three distinct themes:

- A populist concern to introduce a more 'people-oriented' dimension to data gathering in rural development;

- A practical focus on speed and efficiency in gathering such data (so-called 'rapid rural appraisal') to deal, among other things, with the perceived problem that development agencies were not going to wait for anthropologists and others to complete time-consuming, in-depth studies; and,

- An interest in projective methods where the rural poor (ostensibly the 'object' of development) were offered some scope to set the research agenda, influence the kinds of questions asked by researchers, and perhaps control the results.

The wheel has come full circle. Many development and research funding agencies have now absorbed PRA and RRA as elements of their institutional culture, and in so doing have made routine and safe what in the first instance began as an approach intended to subvert development orthodoxy.

The other day a colleague showed me what seemed a professionally competent research proposal, rejected by the funding agency because it failed to include any discussion of PRA in the section on research methods. It seems that all research proposals with a rural development dimension now require explicit discussion of PRA to be acceptable to the agency concerned. Since the colleague was a competent and experienced researcher, with a sound research design, it hardly required much ingenuity to package and re-label the social research elements already within the proposal as 'PRA' and re-submit. What was striking about this episode, however, was that PRA now seems to have become some kind of 'flag of necessity' without which development-oriented 'research vessels' cannot acquire sea-worthiness certificates.

It is pertinent and timely to ask what is being 'flagged' in this way. Does current PRA practice relate to what its original proponents had in mind? And if not, what has it become? And is current practice defensible, either as methodology, or by results (an increased capacity of the poor to act in their own interest)?

There are four particular areas for concern, and I will comment briefly on each, as a way of stimulating discussion.

Has PRA undermined support for long-term social research in rural development?

Six years after the Cold War ended the world is faced with an urgent need to understand patterns of global social change. In all probability, present incomprehension in Europe and North America concerning social process in large parts of the globe will only be

dispelled by new investment in careful, long-term and comparative on-the-ground social research.

Let me pursue this point in relation to African Studies, the case I know best. Britain has haphazardly but sharply dis-invested in its academic expertise on Africa over the past 15 years (the life time of PRA/RRA). The same is true of North America, where serious African Studies research has never been harder to fund. Nor has this short-fall been made good by other international players (Japan excepted), or by African countries themselves. PRA/RRA cannot itself be blamed for what some would consider a general weakening of methodological resolve by the field-work oriented social sciences. But it does not help to stiffen that resolve when proponents of PRA/RRA insist that serious field investigation (inevitably time-consuming and expensive) is some kind of ivory-tower self-indulgence. If the social sciences are not much further forward than they were in 1980 in understanding some of the deepest dilemmas of poverty (some would say understanding has diminished) then surely there is a need for more, not fewer, high-quality long-term comparative studies. There is, therefore, a problem of coexistence. What can PRA enthusiasts do to ensure that their own methodological attainments are not seized upon by research bureaucrats as an excuse to limit further investment in in-depth studies of social change among the rural poor?

The bureaucratisation of PRA: a contradiction in terms?

Does the routinisation of PRA within the bureaucratic processes of development agencies contradict or divert the original aim of giving more voice and control to the rural poor?

We live in a label-conscious world. This enthusiasm for labels imparts an air of innovation to research tools that are not really new at all. Have PRA/RRA enthusiasts forgotten that social scientists long ago regularly used such projective devices as mental mapping and informant-based social ranking? 'RRA' itself is surely nothing more than the old preliminary survey re-labelled to disguise the fact it is no longer preliminary to anything, but the work the anthropologist is expected to do on an appraisal mission while the economists are assembling the really important data. Producing a report on the final day of a ten-day mission, with coverage of social as well as economic factors, may be the reality of the jet-set consultancy world, but forcing social scientists to work like economists and accountants is part of the problem, not part of the solution!

The labelling phenomenon is a particular worry because, seemingly, it responds to bureaucratic rather than research requirements - the need to find a 'methodology' for the 'soft' social sciences that roughly matches in scale and scope the other items in the kit-bag of the modern development management team. This is not how practitioners of 'hard' sciences go about their problems. They also work in teams, and difficult and time-consuming research processes are recognised as bottlenecks to team performance. But the response is to invest in the bottleneck area, not to hide low standards of data acquisition by giving the troublesome procedure a fine-sounding name.

Understanding the dilemmas of the rural poor is extremely difficult because they lead exceedingly complex lives. They have to, in order to survive. The cultural dimensions of poverty are hardest of all to study, because this involves understanding commitments that pay off only in the longer term (perhaps over an entire life-time). To expect data gathering in these areas to fit short-term schedules is to travesty the issue.

My impression was that economists were beginning to listen to this point when the message was garbled by the emergence of PRA/RRA as an 'answer' to the 'problem' of where to fit the social studies perspectives into the busy schedules of development consultancy teams. Fortunately, theoretical developments within economics itself - especially the economics of institutions - seem to be coming to the rescue. It is clear (from, for example, the work of Douglass North, 1990) that economists have begun to tackle the thorny issues of how to assess 'informal constraints' and measure long-term tendencies within an 'institutional culture'. This brings

— 2

economists on to empirical terrain where anthropologists have long been conspicuous in their isolation. If economists (the trend-setters in development methodology) have become more sensitive to the special problems of studying long-term social change this may serve to weaken the bureaucratic logic that requires PRA/RRA to be pressed into service (perhaps against its designers' best intentions) as 'quick-and-dirty' anthropology on economists' terms.

What is the social theory underpinning PRA?

It is not often clear where PRA/RRA practitioners stand in relation to the major debates in social theory. What would PRA/RRA look like as seen from these different theoretical standpoints?[1] The importance, or difficulty, of such an exercise should not be minimised, since it raises the central issue of what the framers of PRA/RRA conceive 'participation' to be. Consider this example.

PRA/RRA now has an impressive repertoire of specific 'methods' (at least judged by the numbers of labels in circulation), but is there any independent evidence to demonstrate that these methods really achieve the data-generating and empowerment goals their proponents claim? At first glance, the added value of PRA/RRA over established social science method, seems to lie in PRA/RRA's emphasis on projective methods (such as ranking, mapping and so on). The projective element provides the 'handle' offered to the rural poor to participate. But what does this mean in practice?

In a famous instance, Bourdieu (1977) showed that the Berber farm calendar is not a seasonal template that guides agricultural decision making, but a product of that decision-making process. It is in appreciation of this point,

---

[1] What would PRA/RRA look like from, say, a Durkheimian perspective (perhaps some of the methods used by the 'culture theory' research group of Mary Douglas, Michael Thompson, Steven Rayner and others would already count as a type of PRA?), or from the standpoint of 'structuration theory' (Giddens) or 'practice theory' (Bourdieu)?

Hardin's study of indigenous aesthetics argues, that the Krono people of Sierra Leone do not waste energy on teaching in words, but mediate cultural values through practice.

What, then, are we to make of a participatory development exercise that assumes that there is a clear split between structure and action, and where structure takes precedence over action? Put explicitly, what kind of muddle are we in if one set of participants - the organisers - holds the view that the farm calendar being plotted on the flip-chart is a template for agricultural action, and the other group - the rural poor - sees it as an outcome of what they do? In short, is the real worry about PRA/RRA not the legitimacy of its short-cut methods, but rather the implausibility of its (unstated) theoretical frame?

The context of participation

Who then is participating in what? Perhaps the answer to this puzzle will be found if we take seriously the question *"what do the rural poor make of 'participatory development' as practice"?* Do participative initiatives ever break free from the context of local politics? One possible set of answers is to be found by analysing the micro-politics of rural consensus formation. The anthropological literature contains a number of important examples. None is more appropriate to this debate than William Murphy's analysis of a public meeting among the Mende of eastern Sierra Leone (Murphy, 1990). Murphy is not writing about PRA/RRA in action (though he might as well be), but about established local political procedures for consensus formation. He describes how village elders create space for people to express differences of opinion in public meetings, and how through managing this space the decisions made generally favour village élites.

For those of us concerned to rescue the concept of PRA/RRA as a means of empowerment for the rural poor, the first question must be *"was it ever realistic to think that a discourse-oriented PRA/RRA would evade cooption by local politics?"* If Murphy's example induces pessimism on this score, I think the answer, nevertheless, must be *"let's look and see"*. Clearly, much work needs to be

done, using the kind of methodology used in Murphy's research, to calibrate and validate PRA/RRA in specific cultural and political contexts. It seems obvious that this work requires the full application of in-depth social analysis. In the absence of such a body of case-study analysis any confidence that PRA/RRA operates independently of established local structures of political discourse, and is therefore effective in reaching goals of participative enfranchisement, is based on faith, not science.

• **Conclusion**

My sceptical remarks above should not be taken to imply despair concerning PRA/RRA. I still hold to the original ambitions of the 1980 workshop that a social science could be emancipatory for the poor, by involving rural communities in analysis of their own predicament. I am hopeful that the bureaucratic infatuation with PRA/RRA is a passing phase.

The most urgent task facing PRA/RRA, in my estimation, is to come to terms with action. Modern social theory insists that the rural poor, like the rest of us, ceaselessly engage in the business of creating and re-creating life worlds. Discourse (discussion, mapping, ranking...the entire panoply of projective analysis), whatever its value as role-reversal therapy for arrogant professionals (a value I would not deny), is but one restricted dimension of this practice. The serious recognition being given to farmer experimentation among agricultural innovators, as distinct from older approaches to agricultural extension based on the idea of 'information' as a commodity to be 'exchanged', seems to offer some suitable pointers to the direction in which PRA/RRA must move.

In my own estimation, the first major task of this new PRA/RRA will be to wean itself from a desire to document - to 'know things' in ways capable of sustaining discussion, or filling boxes in consultants' reports - and move towards interventions in which attention focuses on action as a key component in the establishment of an emancipatory learning environment.

- **Paul Richards,** Department of Anthropology, University College London, WC1E 6BT, UK.

REFERENCES

Bourdieu, P. 1977. Outline of a Theory of Practice. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Hardin, K.L. 1992. The Aesthetics of Action. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC.

Kaplan, R. 1994. The coming anarchy. Atlantic Monthly, February 1994.

Murphy, W. 1990. Creating the appearance of consensus in Mende political discourse. American Anthropologist 92 (1): 24-41.

North, D.C. 1990. Institutions and Institutional Change and Economic Performance. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

3

PRA and anthropology: challenges and dilemmas

Ian Scoones

• Introduction

These reflections consist of two parts. The first explores the myths surrounding Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). These are myths propagated by development practitioners, donors, and academics alike. I attempt to debunk some of them, drawing on my experience (and interpretation) of what PRA is and isn't. These reflections draw heavily on discussions held amongst an international group of PRA practitioners/trainers at the IIED-IDS seminar held in Brighton in May 1994 (see *Sharing our concerns - looking to the future*, *PLA Notes* 22) and debates generated by the IIED *Beyond Farmer First* research programme and workshop.

The second part of this note picks up on some of these issues and asks: How can PRA and anthropology interact? How can different challenges and needs be met? How can PRA and anthropology 'become friends'?

• Ten myths about PRA

1. That it's quick
While many of the methods associated with PRA may be relatively cost-effective in encouraging dialogue, joint analysis and learning, the processes of participatory development are slow and difficult.

2. That it's easy
PRA methods are appealingly simple. This is partly why they have attracted so much attention. They are useful for many people, from villagers to field practitioners to academics. But even experienced PRA practitioners know that the successful use of the approach requires many other skills, especially in communication,

facilitation and conflict negotiation.

3. That anyone can do it
Anyone can help make a map or do matrix scoring with some success. But this does not mean that learning takes place or changes occur. Using the language of participation, as many consultancy groups and large aid bureaucracies do, does not mean that fieldwork will be successful. Wider issues of organisational change, management and reward systems, staff behaviour, ethics and responsibilities also have to be addressed.

4. That it's just fancy methods
The popular and visible image of PRA is the array of methods that have emerged over the past decade. These have proved effective and widely applicable. However, methods are only part of a wider shift being seen within both government and non-government development agencies. This has deeper implications than the adoption of particular methods. In addition to the use of participatory methods, conditions for success seem to include an open learning environment within organisations, and institutional policies, procedures and cultures that encourage innovation.

5. That it's based on particular disciplinary perspectives
PRA has not grown out of the universities and academic departments, but out of practical experiences in the field. The main innovators have been field workers based in the South (but also increasingly in the North). PRA has drawn on and combined elements from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The lack of a conventional disciplinary focus has been considered unrigorous and unpublishable, and the experimental and interactive nature of PRA has been sensed as threatening by some academics. While students increasingly seek to

use PRA methods, teaching professionals sometimes resist. Universities have been the last to take up PRA approaches in their courses.

6. That it has no theoretical basis

PRA is usually associated very much with practical situations and with people engaged in practical development activities. But this does not mean that it is without a rich theoretical basis. PRA is based on an action-research approach, in which theory and practice are constantly challenged through experience, reflection and learning. The valuing of theory over practice in most academic disciplines means that practice-oriented PRA approaches are often not taken seriously. Yet recent theoretical work shows that participatory approaches address important issues in social science debates (Scoones and Thompson, 1994).

7. That it's just old wine in new bottles

PRA has evolved and continues to do so. It's not a magical package that has suddenly appeared from nowhere. As with all major shifts in thinking and practice, PRA unites wide-ranging debates and practices in a novel manner. Its emphasis on visualisation and improvisation contrasts with other approaches using pre-determined diagrams mechanically. Its focus on attitudes and behaviour of external agents contrasts with approaches that disregard this key aspect of local interaction. The extensive range of applications in research and planning on, for example, land tenure, HIV, urban planning, natural resource management and domestic violence, and subsequent sharing of experiences enriches methodological development. It has proven adaptable to diverse contexts, and accessible and acceptable to a wide range of development professionals.

8. That training is the answer

One common response to 'new' ideas is to train everyone in their use. The demand for training in PRA is phenomenal. This carries several risks. First, inexperienced trainers are threatening the quality of training and subsequent practice. Second, a training course alone will not ensure appropriate follow-up. Too often, organisations have not explored the implications for themselves in terms of support after the training. Successful training requires encouraging new ways of learning within organisations. Training courses are only part of the answer.

9. That people involved are neutral

The myth of the neutral, detached, observing researcher or practitioner is incorrect. People are never neutral, whether they are village participants or external agents. Everyone is unavoidably a participant in some way or other, and these roles and implications need to be understood. This will affect the information gathered and the analyses carried out. In participatory development, everyone is responsible for his or her actions. The political and ethical implications of PRA must therefore be discussed openly and responded to.

10. That it's not political

The actions of people engaged in participatory research or development have consequences which are in a broad sense political. Power, control, and authority are all part of participatory processes. Conflicts, disputes and tensions may be raised when becoming involved in such a process. Ignoring this is dangerous. Everyone should be aware of the issues of power and control, conflict and dispute that are part of an action-research approach to development. All participants must learn and be ready to deal with these issues. This may mean taking sides or taking a mediating or negotiating role, which are all political acts.

- ## PRA and anthropology: why they should be friends

What PRA can offer anthropology

Anthropology appears (from an outsiders' perspective at least..) strong on theory but weak on methods. One social anthropology lecturer once said to me *"anthropology does not need methods, it needs theory"*. When asked about training for fieldwork he said: *"All I tell my students is that they should go to the field and be polite"*. The apparent lack of discussion of what to do once you get to the field (except participant observe, politely) seems unfortunate considering the wealth of methods that could be added to the anthropologists' kit bag, potentially enriching long term fieldwork immensely. PRA methods may be very important in this respect. Judging

by the positive response of students to short courses on PRA run in anthropology departments, it should not be difficult to enrich anthropological fieldwork in this way.

PRA approaches may also offer something to the vexed question of what anthropologists should do outside academia. It is clear that not all anthropology graduates can be employed by the universities (nor do they all want to be). But applied/development anthropology appears to have a slightly dirty feel to the purists within academe, making it difficult for students to 'admit' to a desire to contribute to the practical issues of development.

Unfortunately, the disdain towards the applied is reinforced by the usual role for anthropologists (and other 'soft' social scientists) in development work. Their job is often to come in late during evaluation missions in an 'expert' role to attempt to pick up the pieces of yet another development failure. This is both depressing and wasteful of skills.

One debate (eg. within ODA and the World Bank) is on how anthropologists can contribute (subtext: quickly and cheaply) to conventional development processes. How can the participant observation process be compressed to give useful information? To me this debate appears to miss the point. Why should the anthropologist be just another of the horde of external experts with a particular disciplinary skill? Instead, anthropologists ought to be equipped to facilitate and catalyse PRA approaches run by local people (not outsider experts) and to encourage learning and change (ie. development).

In addition, the reflective, analytical and theoretical/philosophical foundations of the discipline should provide the ideal basis for challenging the type of prevalent myths outlined above in a constructive and positive manner to the benefit of all. Instead of disengaging from the PRA debate (or providing the safe, carping critique from outside), anthropologists should be engaging, learning, innovating and critiquing from within (see this issue).

What anthropology can offer PRA

Anthropology is good at understanding contexts, the roles of actors and the micro-politics of development action. All of these issues are essential elements of understanding for action research. The challenging, reflective attention to detail and dynamics are all qualities that should enhance PRA practice at all levels. Sadly much of the debate around such issues is deeply shrouded in exclusive, academic language. The discipline appears to become more and more impenetrable to the adventurous outsider.

This is not to say that theoretical and philosophical understandings are unimportant. If expressed in accessible language, they can be vital in the continuous testing of the praxis of action-research and PRA. Ongoing theoretical debates about the contested nature of knowledge, about expression of identities, about performance and about language and meaning are all highly significant in applied development work. Each provide insight and challenges to the myths outlined above. Again, the plea is to drop the arcane language and come out into the open!

While some claim that anthropology is not about methods (see above), there are clearly many important methodological contributions derived from anthropological work. For instance, the network analysis work by Mitchell in Zambia (from the Manchester School of anthropologists working with the Rhodes Livingstone Institute in Lusaka) comes to mind. Today it may look horribly functionalist and not very participatory, but it nevertheless remains something to be built on rather than discarded as passé. Similarly, discussions of performance and the methodological implications of various forms of (non-)discursive behaviour is another relevant issue for the visualisation and role play approaches to PRA. The list could go on.

• Conclusion

PRA needs anthropology to continue the process of reflection, self-critique and theoretical and methodological enrichment. An aloof disengagement or a negative critique of poor practice does not contribute to new

learning and change for anyone. In the same way anthropology needs an applied context to work effectively and make the most of the discipline's insights. Is not engagement with the more radical approaches to participatory development another route for applied anthropology?

- **Ian Scoones,** Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK.

NOTE

This article was written as a summary overview piece for the workshop on PRA and Anthropology held in Manchester in July 1994 (see note on page 12 in this issue).

REFERENCE

Scoones, I. and Thompson, J. 1994. Beyond Farmer First: Rural People's Knowledge, Agricultural Research and Development. IT Publications Ltd., London.

4

Trades in different worlds: listening to refugee voices

Rachel Hinton

- ## Introduction

Rehearsed in anthropological methods and assuming that my questions could best be explored through participant observation, I arrived in Nepal in 1993 to spend a year amongst Bhutanese refugees[1]. As an anthropologist, building trust and relationships were a priority. Together with my neighbours, I built a hut and began to learn their language, spent time in their homes and became part of the community. In the process, it became apparent that they had expectations about what I could do for them. They had questions too. Displaced and disempowered, denied access to decision-making structures, they wanted a channel for their views. My neighbours perceived me as a 'provider' in a position of power as an 'outsider', whilst affiliation with Oxfam and the support from UNHCR brought institutional obligations. These practitioners required timely information, in a form that was accessible. It was not enough, in this context, to set my own agenda and quietly assume the part of the participant observer.

As a process through which the refugee community led and owned the information generated, PRA offered a way for some of these dilemmas to be resolved. We worked together, choosing the most appropriate method as questions arose. Three principal methodologies were used in parallel: questionnaire surveys, PRA and participant observation[2]. Questionnaires were used with a random sample of women aged 15-45. PRA exercises were carried out with the same informants, some before and some after survey interviews for comparative purposes.

Observations were recorded (see Figure 1) to enhance interpretation of the information. This paper focuses on how these methodologies differed and explores questions of validity, appropriateness and complementarity.

Shared worlds, shared interests?

Each of us has our own life experience that shapes the way we make sense of and are understood by others. These experiences, and the interactions that research involves, inhibit as well as enable particular kinds of insights. Recognising this has encouraged greater reflexivity about relations of power in research. Yet academics ultimately use people's *"lives to produce texts for personal gain and despite attempts to give a participatory voice the relationship always remains unequal"* (Strathern, 1987).

This *"awkward relationship"* (Strathern, 1987) between activism and academic research raises dilemmas not only for how others are represented in anthropologists' texts, but also for the practice of anthropological research itself. In conventional anthropological research:

"Anthropologists take information and leave to analyse it elsewhere. Sometimes they venture back to share their findings. Often not. Not only are the objects of their knowledge excluded from analysis, they are also denied ownership of their information for their own planning and use" (Cornwall, 1992).

---

[1] The refugees had fled from Bhutan to Nepal as a result of cultural conflict.

[2] The study lasted a month, and involved three co-researchers and 12 facilitators, each with one week's training on the specific survey methodology. At least two trained PRA facilitators were present at each PRA group exercise.

For the refugees with whom I worked, giving them a 'participatory voice' in the texts I produced was not enough. Gathering information that I alone would analyse and comment on later would not meet their expectations, nor those of the agencies who assisted me. The refugees, in their particularly disempowered situation, were acutely aware of inequalities brought about by being *acted on* rather than *actors with* the agencies. Participatory processes gave them greater ownership, confidence and a measure of control. One co-worker commented: *'Usually we undertake written interviews and take the answers away on paper [back to the agency]. In PRA the refugee people owned most of the process and made copies themselves of their work."*

The significance of participating in the process was highlighted when refugees requested that the outcomes from PRA exercises be displayed in public spaces. Despite different cultural worlds and the obvious personal gain of academic work, one key social interest was shared through the research: knowledge. And through shared knowledge, they perceived were wider gains:

> *"If we had been less ignorant, literate and aware of our rights, we would not have had to leave our homeland, we would not be refugees now. PRA enables us to explain ourselves and builds our confidence to speak out even in groups"* (refugee facilitator).

Knowledge acquisition in its own right had created opportunities for empowerment, but was not regarded by everyone as a goal that merited the price of participation. Some people remained concerned that not all the research undertaken 'with them' was necessarily 'for them'.

Figure 1. Sample of observations made during participatory exercises

_____

Hearing the unseen, seeing the unsaid

Marginal voices are often excluded in conventional development consultation with 'communities'. Official representatives, often educated men, are consulted as 'the voice of the people' often simply because they offer the easiest access into the community. The non-participation of some of the most resourceful and skilled individuals may be overlooked as a result of poor survey work and a lack of understanding of local social and political processes. By living amongst the community even the silent are heard. The participatory nature of PRA also aims to be inclusive of other voices. When refugee leaders listened to the contributions of fellow refugees they were often surprised by their abilities. But even when PRA is used with pre-selected groups there is scope for domination. The skill of the facilitator to redirect, and record, dominant voices is critical in interpreting the outcomes.

Tyler (1986) argues that it is the said and unsaid together that create meaning. PRA builds on the recognition that social meaning may be created through visual as much as verbal forms. Visual representations offer a way to report the unsaid. Concepts of illness were more readily portrayed in maps of the body than through verbal discussion alone. Social maps were produced with amazing accuracy. Daily experience of the distribution of vegetables made the process of matrix ranking accessible to women.

Yet, visual methods alone did not produce an understanding. Interpretation, through probing and facilitating discussion, as well as locating those who spoke, was critical in understanding these representations.

Although PRA activities brought people together to participate in the research, the heterogeneity of the population meant that rarely was one form of representation shared by all. This form of representing knowledge varied according to who participated in or facilitated exercises. For example, educated school students often imposed categories on the people whose voice they claimed to represent through their desire for westernised 'scientific' diagrams (Box 1). Some leaders would consider it 'backward' to use local categories. If the voices of the educated or the leaders dominated when information was presented, data would be preserved in alien categories or mathematical diagrams.

Developing the skills to observe, as well as record and intervene appropriately, was an important part of the research process. It enabled facilitators to situate the various positions of those who spoke and to recognise some of the motives behind what was said (Box 2).

BOX 1

Early in the training of the students one group returned proudly with a neatly copied chart of their work. They were proud to claim that they had listened to a group of illiterate women who were not part of any of the formal programmes in the camp and whose voice they felt was often lost. Yet when they displayed the diagram not only was it in neat bar chart form but the categories were those of the Western calendar. We discussed the issue and it materialised that the women had spoken of wet and dry seasons with no relation to months in the Nepali or European year and they had regrouped different symbols to represent quantity. The children had reinterpreted it into the 'school style' that held prestige (fieldnotes).

BOX 2

After two months of weekly PRA sessions the facilitators had become aware of the need to record all kinds of behaviour to gain an understanding beyond the generalised picture. Those who had used tape recorders to capture individual positions had become more confident about the usefulness of doing so and the validity of the results this produced. Pingala in particular had become good at spotting the common 'official' position that the community could provide if they were unsure of the motives of the group - or not interested in putting their energy into the exercise. This ability to distinguish between the responses that community members were providing was vital in knowing how to further analyse the data (fieldnotes).

Living in the camp, I got to know many people well. For the majority of the 80,000 refugees, however, my status as an 'outsider' influenced

_____ 3

what they presented in PRA exercises. As a result, I confined my participation to groups of people I knew. The local (Nepali) researchers had less of an 'officialising' impact but it was the refugee school students who were the most successful in developing an understanding through participant observation. They were unthreatening members of the community. It was socially acceptable for them to be inquisitive and even challenging when they felt answers were not 'transparent' or complete. Using their own knowledge of the community, the students would detect and address inconsistencies in what people said to them. The 'outsider story' could be exposed during pre-diagramming discussions. As time progressed and people came to know 'what we knew' it would be they who challenged the newer arrivals or onlookers who presented the 'official story'!

Public and private spaces

PRA activities were essentially public events. Survey interviews, in contrast, were held in the private space of the household. Interestingly, people found open conversation in public space easier than in the 'private' forum of their own crowded home. Women could delegate childcare and domestic responsibilities to relations so that they could join in discussions freely. Private group space allowed people to feel more in control of the issues discussed and to talk in general terms, rather than about themselves.

Even people in the neighbourhood seemed uncomfortable discussing certain issues when responses related to their household, even though they knew I was aware of their activities as I lived amongst them. Questionnaires used in these 'private' spaces yielded results of low validity.

"It was often not until later that I realised the extent that women didn't like to speak openly at home. 'Politeness' demanded a response. If the question is not within their knowledge the respondent doesn't feel confident like if they are worried that they should tell the 'refugee rules' and not the reality. In the camp, someone is always listening" (Jamuna Nepal, interviewer).

Questions of validity

The community clearly knew and could represent accurately trends of population and behaviour. A detailed social map in one of the sectors came close to agency statistics on literacy. PRA activities also offered insights beyond 'official statistics' and exposed the low validity of data gathered by questionnaires alone. The results of the research show that the continued insistence on costly statistical analysis is unfounded. For example, whilst the official surveys illustrated the illnesses that people took to the health centres, PRA revealed the prevalence of deficiency diseases that the community treated in the private domain. This process produced enough data to highlight and address *beri-beri* as a serious health problem months before official action was taken.

Participatory activities were not only quicker, but engaged people more. As Sunkeshra observed, *"the questionnaires consist only of questioning and answering so it is not enjoyable like PRA"*. Where refugees felt that the questions had no relevance to their lives, they rarely clarified or elaborated their answers but instead said *"what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear"*. Agency workers were perceived to have a 'busy schedule' and 'no time to talk'. This belief commonly resulted in feelings of exclusion and resentment. Bishnu Maya, who was interviewed, later admitted: *"It's two years now, people come into my house and ask so many questions. But nothing ever happens. So now I just give a quick answer to let them go away"* (quoted in Damini's diary).

Survey questions are often interpreted in different ways by respondents. PRA activities and participant observation, on the other hand, provide ways to correct conceptual confusions arising from different interpretations of verbal questions. In PRA categories were discussed and agreed on as part of the process, so they were as close as possible to indigenous categories and jointly understood. In one instance, questionnaire data showed that less than 20% of the population were using traditional healers. Observation indicated that the Western medical system is often used as a second option. By using a timeline, a group of

4

school children indicated how facilities were prioritised over a period of time. But when they were asked the exact questionnaire question, the health centres dominated. On discussion, it materialised that they thought the question only related to where people went in the public formal sector.

Conversations prior to PRA activities gave participants the option of defining the question and influencing the means of representing the information. This did more than ensure data validity. As one of the participants observed:

"When we were conducting the PRA exercise about illness and "where do we go to get cured" we were many women together. The two facilitators had explained about the work and we had been together for many weeks. We all discussed what we meant and then we answered honestly and gave the other women confidence to speak out to say the truth." (fieldnotes).

Transparency of the aims and objectives of the research was vital in this process. Once they were involved in the process of research, the refugees were able to show the significance of their history and culture. They felt in control of what was being 'sought' in an attempt to understand. PRA provided a forum in which people had the confidence to speak their mind without presenting the 'agency appeasing' or 'intellectually acceptable' view. If people had had prior experience of taking part in PRA exercises, subsequent survey interviews showed a marked positive 'PRA exposure' effect on their openness and willingness to discuss details.

- **PRA and participant observation**

There were some aspects of people's lives that neither PRA nor surveys could adequately make sense of. Participant observation thus formed a vital complement to the use of PRA, providing important insights and richness of understanding. It was only through observation, for example, that I could begin to understand the processes people followed when seeking a cure. No verbal or visual 'reason' was available.

The kind of rapport that close, day-to-day living in communities facilitates creates a deeper level of understanding about people's lives and the relationships between them. One incident took place, however, that reminded me of the wider social context in which my friendships with people were set (Box 3).

BOX 3

A group of camp leaders gathered in the privacy of the camp committee room for discussions on caste. I had assumed that this room was suitably private. However, during discussions other 'important' refugees wandered in, as was the norm. What had been an appropriate discussion with friends in my room was inappropriate in this more public arena.

Introductions and pre-PRA discussion began in a lively atmosphere of trust. The topic of caste was raised and immediately an onlooker who had joined the group objected. His status meant that no one spoke out. I was unknown to him. My motive, gathering knowledge for academic purposes, was not believed. A hidden agenda was feared. The session was redirected to mapping the districts from which people originated to diffuse tension.

Only later did I see why the question of caste was perceived as a threat. Bilateral government talks had concluded with a decision to reclassify the refugees into distinct groups, only some of whom would be eligible for repatriation. The PRA process was too close to the process of government classification. In all spheres they wanted to be portrayed as the single group: 'the Bhutanese'.

This incident was detrimental to further public displays of trust from friends, for fear of being seen to give confidential information to 'outside officials'.

On this occasion, I had confused the distinction between the easy rapport of friends and the formal PRA setting. They too had not apparently anticipated the problem. PRA is by its nature 'open'. Indeed, this is one of its unique characteristics. But the assumption that rapport built up with individual members would allow for discussion of sensitive issues in a larger forum was mistaken. The open public forum changed the nature of the event. These limitations should have been clear, but

_____

people had discussed other 'sensitive' topics openly before in such spaces.

Group size, location, time and the personalities involved all determine the acceptability of a topic. It is the rule of a single objector not the majority that dominates. Disclosure may be governed more by rules of hierarchy than the desire to inform. This incident not only raises issues of context, appropriateness and local power relations. It also highlights responsibilities held by the researcher.

• **Conclusion**

This work has shown that PRA and anthropology could be of mutual benefit. Without careful training in skills of observing and recording processes, the complex social interactions that take place within PRA exercises can easily be overlooked. When time is short, often the first element to be dropped is observation of process, with problematic implications for interpretation. When time is taken to build rapport, some of the biases of fieldworkers can be addressed. Yet their own part in these processes requires a level of critical self-awareness that enables them to reflect on the impact of their own presence and perspectives. Their understanding of local socio-political contexts, their own socio-economic background and their culture, their academic training and their ability to perceive the interactions that are taking place in PRA exercises are difficult to disentangle from the understandings they gain from PRA exercises.

The assumption by those in power (both local and foreign) that 'scientific' experts know best is the biggest challenge to the appropriate application of participatory approaches. But other challenges come from the scaling up of 'people-centred' and participatory approaches. A recent UNHCR framework for People-Oriented Planning (POP) recommends a series of analyses to determine a refugee profile and context analysis (Anderson *et al.*, 1992). Little methodological advice is given. In the refugee context, PRA has the potential to address POP's concerns. But without the level of detailed process documentation and reflexivity that participant observation offers, PRA can become little more than a visual questionnaire that jeopardises claims both to rigour and to

interpretive advantage over questionnaire surveys.

Lessons from PRA can equally contribute to anthropology. Wright and Nelson (1995) contend that for anthropology, change *"is variously denied or treated as an incidental outcome"*. The world of the refugees did not accommodate anthropologists who wished only to observe, record and leave. Association with Oxfam and the possibility of manipulated 'shared interests' brought the fear of the 'awkward relationship' scenario. But this fear often over-rides the very real fact that change is frequently initiated by local people themselves. Do anthropologists have the 'right' to silently censor the communities' part in research because we as 'outsiders' think we know better? For anthropologists, the visual tools, techniques for building rapport and, above all, the involvement of people in producing and analysing their own information, offer exciting ways to meet some of the challenges of applied action-oriented anthropology.

• **Rachel Hinton,** Trinity Hall, Cambridge CB2 1TJ, UK.

REFERENCES

Anderson, M. B., Howarth (Brazeau), A.M., and Overholt, C. 1992. *A Framework for People-Orientated Planning in Refugee Situations Taking Account of Women, Men and Children.* UNHCR.
Cornwall, A. 1992. Tools for our trade? Rapid or Participatory Rural Appraisal and Anthropology. *Anthropology in Action* 13: 12.
Nelson, N., and Wright, S. (1995). *Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice.* London, Intermediate Technology Publications.
Strathern, M. 1987. An Awkward Relationship: The case of feminism and anthropology. *Sings: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12(2): 276.

_____ 6

Tyler, S. 1986. *Post-Modern Anthropology.* Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC.

5

Social analysis in participatory rural development

David Mosse, with the KRIBP project team

• Introduction

This article focuses on the generation of knowledge about social relationships within participatory rural development projects. There is a growing recognition that relationships of power often set the conditions for participation in research planning and development action (Pottier, 1993; Mosse, 1994, 1995b; Scoones and Thompson, 1994; Nelson and Wright, 1995). They determine whose concerns are expressed, who has access to new resources, who can adopt new public roles, and thus influence the progress of external programmes. These influences are not necessarily direct. Project benefits, for example, may reach poorer households but do so through patronage networks in which men of influence continue or extend their privileged control over local resources. Moreover, projects and their staff are also powerful social actors who influence development choices (Mosse, 1995b).

However, the question remains, how can rural development projects analyse such power relations? What methods are there for the analysis of local social processes? Development practitioners have generally rejected conventional social science research methods for the analysis of social relationships. The approaches of anthropologists and historians in particular are rejected on practical grounds. They rest on the luxury of long-term research which no project can afford. Indeed, the managerial need to compress and rationalise learning has provided a major impetus to the development of rapid and participatory research and appraisal methods (eg. RRA and PRA).

PRA has often proved very effective at generating agro-ecological and (some) economic information. However, it has not proved particularly good for the kind of analysis of social relationships which projects need: information on patterns of dominance and dependence, credit relationships, factions and spheres of political influence and patronage etc. This article suggests some reasons for this in the context of rural development in India. Then, using a project example, it shows how anthropological approaches of participant observation and process documentation might be useful for social research in projects.

• Understanding social relations through PRA

In India, PRA methods have now spread well beyond the confines of the NGO and academic circles where they were developed and where their use was characterised by innovation and flexibility. PRA methods have become part of guidelines for major state initiatives, such as the new national watershed development programme, in which speed, scale and bureaucratic management give shape to their use. As a tool in rapid micro-planning, PRA activity often takes the form of short (two to three day) village-level group exercises combining speed and participation.

In an earlier paper (Mosse, 1994) I described some of the problems experienced with this sort of 'public' PRA at the earliest stages of the Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project (KRIBP), a participatory farming systems development project in tribal western India. PRA methods were used to identify priority problems and to establish basic socio-economic and agro-ecological knowledge for

village-level planning and implementation. An important methodological question was whether PRA could enable project 'outsiders' to understand the social context of their initiatives sufficiently to work effectively within local communities. The first, and most immediate, issue was the usefulness of PRA in problem identification. Could the project team learn enough about local interests and relationships to distinguish underlying community problems from superficial symptoms, private interests, personal ambitions, expectations or ideas about the project? Secondly, could PRA enable the team to learn enough about local social relations (kin ties, factions, patronage links etc.) to link project activities to social networks and so ensure that project initiatives would be managed and sustained by people?

Overall, significant constraints were experienced in using PRA for social analysis. First, while within KRIBP PRA techniques were in many respects successful at generating agro-ecological information, they were less helpful in revealing the structures of power and influence within a village or in helping project workers identify the social relations which shaped 'public' opinion. PRA techniques themselves do not seem well suited to the representation of different types of social relationship. Diagramming methods (such as chapatti diagrams) which can effectively represent these have yet to be developed or refined (eg., Howes, 1991). Perceiving the need for such knowledge the KRIBP project drew on anthropological methods and used genealogies as a semi-participatory method (Mosse and Mehta, 1993). These have been widely used in the project, and together with social maps (maps of settlements marking and numbering individual households) have provided a helpful framework for interpreting, for example, participation in project activities (including PRA itself). Nonetheless genealogies offer only a static and formal picture of social relations, and are therefore inadequate for grasping the shifting dynamics of power in the village.

A second set of problems arose from the use of PRA in the early stages in the project. The project had not worked in this tribal area before and in some villages the recent experience of other development interventions raised uncertainties and anxieties (*"These people are agents of the Forest Department, the project will remove our encroachments and take over our lands"*). Under such circumstances, information on internal community relations is likely to be fairly well guarded. Outsiders' knowledge of these things will be highly constrained by the community's 'official' view of itself as harmonious and unified (Mosse, 1994). Even anthropologists engaged in long term participant observation fieldwork have found such public projections of 'community' hard to penetrate.

A potentially more serious set of problems arises from the *public* (eg., village-wide) contexts of participatory planning. While by no means the only forum for these methods, the use of PRA for rapid community-wide resource mapping and planning often does involve public settings. The first point here is that *participation* in the PRA events themselves is socially determined. In particular, PRAs can be orchestrated locally in ways which exclude divergent opinions or those of non-dominant social groups such as factions, minor lineages or clans, distant hamlets, the young or women (Mosse, 1994). So public expressions of community interests may disproportionately reflect the private interests of dominant groups or individuals. This indeed was the early experience of the KRIBP project, although this was subsequently the focus of much corrective attention. Most obviously the participation of women was limited and in various ways constrained.

With the advantage of greater knowledge of local social structures, it is now clear that in almost all cases, PRA took place under the control of key village leaders (and their groups). These were often the same leaders through whom the project had gained 'entry' into villages, and whose interests feature prominently in the earliest needs identification. Local influentials exerted their control by direct and indirect means. PRA activities took place on their land or by their houses, in public spaces or social contexts over which they held sway (Box 1).

2

<table>
<tr><td>

BOX 1
LOCAL CONTROL OF PRA

In late 1992 it seemed that field workers in one village should be commended for their incorporation of *bhajans* (informal devotional singing sessions) into the PRA event as an example of placing PRA activity within locally understood informal contexts. Six months later it was clear that the *bhajan* had served to mark the PRA proceedings (and subsequent project activity) as the province of a restricted and dominant group within the village. The *bhajan* group was dominated by older men and drawn from a clan-based social group (headed by a village faction leader) who claimed a measure of separation and social superiority over other villagers. The project's incorporation of the *bhajan* only served to underscore the (self) exclusion of other groups in the village.

</td></tr>
</table>

The important point here is that public participatory research methods are unlikely to prove good instruments for the analysis of local power relations since they are shaped by the very social relations which are being investigated. In fact, a fairly good understanding of local social networks, the nature of dominance, patterns and styles of leadership, faction and alliance, and gender relations is a necessary pre-requisite for the organisation of effective PRA based work.

Significantly, in KRIBP, understanding of these relations came not so much from the direct use of PRA methods, but rather from participant observation and critical review of the PRA activity itself. Sometimes this is difficult. How can non-attendance, silence, or passive agreement be recorded? And yet the essential material for our social analysis is not found so much in the agreed output (on map, chart or diagram), but in the absences, the gaps and corrections, the after-thoughts, the errors and false starts, the disagreements or conflicts, even the complete failure of a PRA exercise (as recorded in Mosse, 1994). Through these we get glimpses of how power operates in the community. This highlights the importance of observation and review of project activity more generally as a source of knowledge on social relations.

- **Social knowledge through project action?**

Project action and the observation and analysis of events can be an important source of social learning. As Appadurai (1989) has pointed out, conventional interview-based research techniques (and, one can add, PRA methods too) usually try to capture the identifiable net outcomes of social processes, like organisation and leadership structures, new linkages, input supply lines, and community decisions. However, much important social data are found, not only in the *post facto* outcomes, but also in the quality of transactions, in the relationships implied and in the aspirations and expectations involved. Implementing small project activities, and observing and recording some micro-events or transactions around these, can, in new ways, help us understand social relations and power. In essence this is the objective of *process documentation*.

The KRIBP project was able to use small project actions as part of a strategy for 'village entry' and 'rapport building', to generate social information. These activities included farmer crop trials, medical camps, animal health camps, well deepening, and starting informal schools. They began as responses to direct requests to project staff from villagers, 'expressed needs' (from initial PRAs), KRIBP-initiated ideas and activities, available government programmes, responses to technologies seen during 'exposure visits' and so forth. Although at times *ad hoc* in their implementation, we now know that these activities also provided a way for the project to challenge misplaced expectations and explain and negotiate its participatory approach and poverty focus. However, I want to focus here on the usefulness of these entry-point activities for acquiring social knowledge.

Early on, field workers were encouraged to observe patterns of participation and non-participation in these activities. In a team workshop, for example, they developed contrasting profiles of active and non-active individuals, households or social groups based on these observations. We were able to link wealth, power and participation in two ways. Firstly, active participants in the project tended to be the better endowed, socially prominent

3

_____

and articulate members of the villages. Secondly, participation and access to the project was itself a manifestation of power and prominence in local communities.

By distinguishing between 'active' and 'non-active' villagers a range of social differences were highlighted: in wealth (assets), security, degrees of dependency, social status, kin group membership, the ability to participate in social networks (eg. those used for labour sharing or for mobilising marriage payments), education, influence and articulateness. Non-economic dimensions of 'wealth', such as access to social resources, were especially important in accounting for patterns of participation. Better placed individuals were, moreover, perceived as speaking for others and being knowledgeable, open, innovative, cooperative, clear sighted and in other ways easier to work with. 'The poor' by contrast were perceived as having no standing, being spoken for by others, lacking knowledge or clarity, being irresponsible and pessimistic, and pursuing immediate benefits. Project workers understood better why it would be harder and more risky to work with 'the poor' (Mosse *et al.*, forthcoming).

Observations on the progress of project activities also helped to reveal the dynamics of power and influence and the quality of social relationships involved. One important area concerned styles of leadership and patterns of influence (Box 2).

Often headmen and leaders were able to influence some, but not all, sections of their village. Through the partial collapse of project activities, or the collapse of collective action, it was possible to observe the patterns and styles of influence of given leaders. Examples include the selective withdrawal of households from tree planting or a crop loan scheme. In other cases influence was expressed in the capacity to distribute (rather than obstruct) project benefits. By re-positioning themselves in terms of the project's stated 'poverty' goals and its intention to direct benefits to the poor, for example, leaders aimed to ensure that it was *their poor* who benefited.

BOX 2
THE DYNAMICS OF POWER

In several villages, headmen who had initially expressed support for the project and even hosted PRAs, began (in various covert ways) to withdraw support or to obstruct project ventures when it became clear that the kind of activities KRIBP would undertake (low cost, self-help measures and community action) were not those which would support their existing styles of leadership. This leadership is often exercised through patronage and through brokering the delivery of high subsidy government schemes or public assets (eg., wells, roads, buildings, electricity connections) to villages. In fact, some initiatives such as crop loans directly threatened existing money lending and land mortgaging activities. In several cases leaders attempted to capture resources made available through the project in, for example, withdrawal from agreements to share saplings from tree nurseries

---

In sum, patterns of participation are not only local networks of influence. The implementation of small scale activities highlights the significance of factors such as clan and religious difference, patronage, factional conflict, and leadership struggles. In this way critical reflection on project action generated knowledge about social relationships which is generally not easily accessible through conventional interview methods, or those of rapid appraisal.

- **Strategies for action**

In KRIBP, the social dynamics were highly local. Knowledge of these through an analysis of events helped in the formulation of village, or hamlet-specific development strategies. Understanding local social structures also helped define the best opportunities for project work and helped determine the social conditions for effective participation. In certain villages, Community Organisers tried to avoid manipulative leaders and the problems of working with groups of poor who are clients of village leaders, and to identify spaces within the social structure where the project could gain some foothold.

A recurring component of success in early project activities was the ability to bypass but not confront unsupportive leaders, and yet

_____ 4

_____

obtain the authoritative backing which new ventures in these villages required. Finding the right spaces in which to work was often a matter of identifying an appropriate combination of authority and independence from patronage. A general lesson from early project work was that it was most effective where it left formal structures intact, and found informal contexts for innovation. In some cases this meant shifting attention from the older to the younger generation, from the central to marginal hamlets, or to work with independent clans or returned migrants (see Mosse *et al.*, forthcoming). From the community's point of view this was less risky. New ventures could be tried without risk of disrupting formal social relations, and leaders could observe and change their attitude to the project without losing face. Similar, more subtle shifts were also needed to identify the most appropriate ways of working with women.

It became clear from project practice that the quality of decentralised planning depended upon responsiveness to local social contexts, but that these were far more variable, rapidly changing and inaccessible than the agro-ecological contexts on which the project had gained information through PRA. It was necessary to complement PRA-based planning methods with a form of participant observation, critical (and self-critical) reflection and constant information feedback. What is significant is, firstly, that social insights were derived from a wide variety of informal settings. Secondly, these insights were necessarily external and analytical, rather than participatory.

This sort of 'process monitoring' did not meet all the project's needs for social information. But it did identify the most appropriate contexts for further learning and planning. Critical reflection on project activities resulted in a shift away from village-wide PRA towards generating information in particular hamlets and in the more informal and private space of the neighbourhood and home (Box 3). These social contexts not only broadened participation and the quality of discussions in planning, but also enabled the project to acquire social information which were difficult to handle in the earlier more 'public' PRA.

BOX 3
INFORMAL CONTEXTS FOR ANALYSING DIFFERENCE

The project needed a better grasp of *difference* within communities, among other things to monitor its gender and poverty focus, and more detail on assets, flows, labour deployment, migration and decision making.

To meet these needs neighbourhood, kin- or hamlet-based wealth ranking exercises were organised with different groups of men and women. These identified socially significant indicators and broad categories of relative disadvantage from which a very small number of individual households were selected for detailed profiling. Project workers spent time getting to know individual households, staying with them and, using a broad checklist developed for the purpose, produced descriptive profiles of representative households together with analyses of their livelihoods. Through being generated over a longer period, by focusing on informal contexts, and by taking place while other activities were in progress, the social understandings emerging from these 'livelihood analyses' were qualitatively different from those produced from the early project PRA activities. For one thing, through much improved women's participation, the gender division of labour and women's areas of influence were better understood. It was also easier to generate information which was more clearly relevant for planning.

Much of this data would not be required on a continuous basis, or from any but a few sample villages/households at the beginning of the project. But the *process* of such research nonetheless helped project workers broaden their contacts in villages and shaped their understanding of the more dynamic elements of society. House-to-house work facilitated informal conversations through which fieldworkers gradually built up a picture of local social relations on issues such as relations of debt, social obligation, land mortgage, social conflict (eg., historical feuds and witchcraft accusations) or political ambition which were less accessible to public PRAs.

As noted above, much of this social information, like that from observing activities, did not arise from *participatory* appraisal. It was not a type of 'people's

5

_____

_____

knowledge'. Indeed, these insights (in some cases represented by fieldworkers in their own analytical Venn or chapatti diagrams of villager groups, factions, alliances etc.) were not, and probably *could* not have been, generated in *group* discussions by villagers. Like other analytical models, and like the knowledge gained from the critical reflection on project activities, they represented an external viewpoint. They were necessary guides to outsiders' planning interventions, but not the same as the models-in-use of villagers themselves. Of course, local people already have the sophisticated knowledge necessary for everyday social life. Often this knowledge remains tacit and need not, or cannot without risk of conflict, be made explicit. The often-used polarity between 'extractive' and 'participatory' research modes thus overlooks the fact that certain types of knowledge employed in participatory projects is *necessarily* external and analytical. Indeed, knowledge of social relationships which helps project workers identify the conditions for participation itself, to bargain with villagers on issues of equity, gender, or cost recovery, for example, is of this kind (Mosse, 1995b).

• **Conclusions and implications**

I have suggested that PRA methods need to be complemented by critical reflection on events to generate information on local social relationships. This sort of social analysis is, to an extent, external and analytical (rather than participatory), and within KRIBP, involved facilitated participant observation and process documentation of project action. PRA training had only a small part to play in developing fieldworkers' ability to acquire a sophisticated understanding of social dynamics and to apply this knowledge in village-specific development strategies.

This form of process documentation is not, however, particularly demanding of project resources, and in practice amounts to no more than giving attention to and placing value on what is going on anyway, namely outsider fieldworkers engaging in rural communities and adapting their approach in the light of their experience of local social life. Field-level reviews draw on and make explicit the practical knowledge of social relations used by

project staff working at the village level. This does, at least initially, require external facilitation in the form of some trained social scientist who can introduce key questions, prompt analysis and document important observations. Moreover, to be of value to the project as a whole this requires a monitoring system which regularly feeds such observations back into project decision making. But most importantly, it requires a management system which is supportive of critical reflection and responsive to information feedback.

In practice, however, the support of self-critical information feedback is extremely difficult in most organisations. Organisational cultures which value, reward and use sociological insight in programme decision making and strategy development are rare in both public and NGO sectors, where there are still strong tendencies towards uniform prescription, centralised decision-making and the reporting of success. Decentralised analytical skills are often precariously placed, viewed with suspicion, and easily undermined or routinised into standard procedures. As has been the experience with PRA, the effectiveness of new research methods ultimately depends upon the institutional context in which they are used.

It is, perhaps, unrealistic to expect that the polarity between the 'positive practitioner' and the 'negative academic' (Chambers, 1983) will be resolved in the person of the self-critical fieldworker on a widespread and institutionalised basis.

But this may not be necessary. Process monitoring of the kind illustrated here is not required everywhere, or at all times. It is important under particular conditions, such as when developing and testing new field methods, or prior to major expansion; when starting work in a new area; when initiating complex activities or introducing innovation; when selectively reviewing strategy; or training new fieldworkers. All of these conditions apply to the KRIBP project.

_____

- **David Mosse,** Centre for Development Studies, University of Wales, Swansea, UK, and **KRIBP Project Team,** Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project, Dahod, Gujarat, India.

REFERENCES

Appadurai, A. 1989. Small-scale techniques and large-scale objectives. In: *Conversations Between Economists and Anthropologists: Methodological issues in measuring economic change in rural India*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Chambers, R. 1983. *Rural development: Putting the last first.* Longman, London.

Howes, M., 1991. Beyond chapattis. *RRA Notes* 12. IIED, London.

Mosse, D. 1994. Authority, gender and knowledge: theoretical reflections on the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal. *Development and Change* 25 (3): 497-526.

Mosse, D. 1995a. Local institutions and power: the history and practice of community management in the development of tank irrigation systems in south India. In: Nelson, N and Wright, S. (eds.) *Power and Participatory Development: Theory and practice.* Intermediate Technology Publications Ltd., London.

Mosse, D. 1995b. 'People's knowledge' in project planning: the limits and social conditions of participation in planning agricultural development. *ODI Agricultural Research and Extension Network Paper* 58. ODI, London.

Mosse, D., Ekande, T., Sodhi, P., Jones, S., Mehta, M., and Moitra, U. (forthcoming). Approaches to participatory planning: a review of the KRIBP experience. *KRIBP Working Paper 5.* CDS, University of Wales, Swansea, UK.

Mosse, D. and Mehta, M. 1993. Genealogies as a method of social mapping in PRA. *RRA Notes* 18. IIED, London.

Nelson, N. and Wright, S. 1995. *Power and participatory development: Theory and practice.* IT Publications Ltd., London.

Pottier, J. (ed) 1993. *Practising Development: Social science perspectives.* Routledge, London.

7

6

Participatory appraisal and education for empowerment?

Korrie de Koning

• Introduction

PRA has much in common with Participatory Research (PR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR). The latter concepts were developed in the 1970s by pioneers such as Rajesh Tandon and Fernandes, Orlando Fals-Borda and Budd Hall, who highlighted the need to link research with empowering education and action. The common ground in PR and PRA is the concern with persistent inequalities in the distribution of power and resources and the development of a research and planning methodology which is more people-centred in its approach.

PRA would, in theory, enable the rural poor to influence the research agenda, thus leading to an increased capacity to act in their own interest (Richards, this issue). These intentions raise the question of whose interests we have in mind when we aim to enhance the ability of the poor to set their own priorities and act for themselves. Who are these 'poor people'? What part do PRA facilitators play in the process of empowerment in practice? This paper intends to trigger a discussion on the contribution and potential of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) to empowerment.

• Educational processes and PRA

In the 1970s, Paulo Freire made an important contribution to the understanding of education by linking the process of knowing with the process of learning. Linking knowing and learning through an on-going cycle of action and reflection leads to the development of a critical

awareness about the world in which people live (Freire, 1972). Freire believes that most educational activities do not challenge inequalities in the learners' lives. This kills initiative, creativity and the belief and confidence in one's ability to think for oneself.

To improve their lives, people who have lived in marginalised positions need to develop a critical insight into the structures, ideas and practices in society and in themselves that place and keep them in positions of inequality. For example, in my experience, poor and illiterate people are often referred to in a negative way. People say of them: *"They don't know how to look after their children"*; *"They cannot organise their own lives"*; *"How can they hope to survive with so many children"* etc. Liberating educational processes enable people to become aware of where these images come from, the circumstances influencing their lives, and to give meaning to their individual and communal situation. They can then decide what action would be most important and feasible to take.

Challenging inequalities is a long-term process. For PRA to live up to its aims, it must be part of this longer term process and go beyond the moments of data collection, visual documentation and instant analysis. If we are to address inequalities we must aim for a continuing process of learning which integrates research, reflection and action.

Shifts in practice

Freirian and other adult education approaches implemented by many NGOs in the 1970s began to lose their credibility by the 1980s. The 1980s saw a shift amongst donors towards short-term funding and the demand for quick results. With some exceptions, many donors

began to lose interest in approaches to participatory development that emphasised empowerment, in favour of more predictable and measurable outcomes. Activists focused on immediate action and direct benefits to the groups with which they worked, rather than systematically keeping track of the process. The changes they brought about were also not easy to measure. Much of their work and successes has, therefore, remained undocumented. Conventional indicators offered little scope for assessing increases in self-esteem, self-confidence and critical awareness of the people activists worked among, nor in their capacity to act on and change their situations.

There was a growing realisation that individuals and groups are able to produce their own data in a way that is cost-effective and reliable. Both activists and donor agencies saw the value of Participatory Rural Appraisal when it developed in the late 1980s. Also, the methods used in PRA-based work have expanded the ability of many grassroots initiatives to trigger discussion with people about their situation and to document and recognise local knowledge and changes.

The emphasis on learning with and from local people in a relaxed and flexible way and the need to show respect for people and 'hand over the stick' are in line with the principles and ideas on which many activists based their work. The information and knowledge produced by the participants can help to enhance their self confidence in the value of their own insights. The visual presentations can also trigger a reflection process. Used in this way PRA methods can form part of an emancipatory learning environment.

However, to what extent are PRA methods, principles and procedures actually much used in this context of empowerment? Many documents on PRA focus on the methods, the findings they yield, and the short term process of how to facilitate their use. But where are the reports on what happens after the short period during which the PRA process is conducted? In what way does the use of PRA methods contribute to an improvement in people's circumstances?

PRA seems, in many cases, to be used in the same extractive ways as other forms of appraisals. Many practitioners, such as health professionals, agriculturalists, evaluators and researchers, who learn about the methods, have no background or training in empowering education processes. For example, mapping of health and demographic information by community members has become a common method in the field of health. However, it is rare for these maps to be used by the groups who produced them to discuss underlying factors that influence their health and lives, or to look at inequalities between families and between groups and what could be done about that.

The result is that the participatory methods themselves contribute very little to an emancipatory process. Unless PRA is explicitly linked with an educational process which enables groups of people with little power and resources to gain more control over their own lives, the term 'participatory' remains meaningless.

- **The issue of difference in PRA**

PRA aims to work with the poor in a way that will give them more power in influencing research agendas, the production of knowledge, and what happens in their lives. But who are 'the poor'? It is often up to individual facilitators to make sure that difference is addressed and that communities are not treated as if they are homogeneous. When looking at difference, one of the issues is whom is given a voice by being included as a participant, and whose ideas are informing the results.

The abstract use of categories such as 'the oppressed' or 'the poor' raises further questions about difference, both in terms of theory and in practice. Paulo Freire, like many other men writing about human experience in the sixties, failed to address the differences between and among groups of oppressed people. By treating 'the oppressed' as a single category, Freire suggested that the meaning of oppression and the paths towards liberation were the same for all oppressed people. His examples illustrate bosses oppressing workers, and men oppressing other men (Freire, 1972).

2

But he failed to look at situations where, for example, men who are oppressed in the workplace or by being out of work, can take the role of oppressor of their wives and daughters in the home. In his later work he recognises and welcomes the influence of feminist theory (McLaren, 1993).

However, although the feminist movement has started to re-address the male bias in the selection of knowledge, many research projects continue to exclude women and their views (Maguire, 1987).

Many participatory research projects concerned with gender have addressed the issue of difference further, by challenging the use of women as a unified category. They show us that the meaning of being a woman differs depending on the specific place, situation and time. This also means that individual women need to exchange views and ideas, and to negotiate a shared course of action that has meaning in their specific situation (Box 1). Alice Welbourn shows how the use of different PRA methods enabled her and the participants to document and raise awareness about the different experiences, insights and ideas of individual and groups of women (Welbourn, 1992).

However, it is one thing to identify differences but another to deal with the conflicting interests that emerge. Most reports of PRA-based work provide little insight into how different interests are negotiated within the larger community. Obviously it is much more difficult for less influential groups to have their interests taken on board if these are in conflict with the interests of others. Worse still is when action is taken by a group which has not thought through the potential backlash (and if and how they can cope with that). This can be a disempowering experience which further reduces people's confidence in the possibility for change.

Strategic planning of action in participatory planning should, therefore, include the anticipation of possible reactions and how that will influence the development of a particular group. This is an essential part of enabling less powerful groups to act in their own interest (see Box 1).

BOX 1
WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

SARTHI (Social Action for Rural and Tribal Inhabitants of India) conducted work in Gujarat, India (Khanna, 1992) on women's health and empowerment. Women had shared secrets about their husbands' drinking and the subsequent wife beatings for years. However, the women decided not to lobby for the closure of the drinking houses because they felt they would be unable to cope with their husbands' reactions. Instead they concentrated on other, more acceptable, activities which helped to strengthen themselves. Actions which carried a substantial risk for a backlash would only be started after women, as a group, had carefully weighed up the possible public and private reactions and when they felt it was important for their own development to do so .

Source: Renu Khanna, pers. comm.

The facilitator is responsible for enabling the group of participants to project and analyse carefully the effects of possible reactions to the action they propose, and to clarify their position in the suggested action. It is the group of participants who has to take the final decision.

• **Conclusions**

PRA has much to offer by, at least, setting the process of empowerment into motion. The methods can create a feeling of achievement amongst participants, which in turn helps to enhance self-confidence and self-esteem. The visualisation methods are also helpful as a constant point of reference and are useful to trigger further discussions and reflection. The flexible, experimental style in which facilitators are encouraged to work provides scope for involving different groups and individuals which gives a greater change to clarify and document differences between and among groups.

However, there is a need in training and reporting on PRA, to pay more attention to:

- who formulates the questions and issues to be researched;
- what the role is of PRA, PRA facilitators, organisations and groups in the

community involved in ensuring an ongoing process of reflection and action; and,

- how to deal with conflicting interests and issues of power between and among groups.

Those using PRA must seek better ways for communities to reflect on shifting power relationships over time and to ensure that different perspectives and needs are not only heard and documented but are also taken into account.

- **Korrie de Koning,** Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, Pembroke Place, Liverpool L3 5QA, UK.

REFERENCES

Fals-Borda, O. and Rahman, M.A. (eds). 1991. *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action research*. Intermediate Technology Publications, London.

Fernandes, W. and Tandon, R. 1981. *Participatory Research and Evaluation: Experiments in research as a process of liberation*. Indian Social Institute, New Delhi.

Freire, P. 1972. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Penguin.

Hall, B., Etherington, A. and Jackson, T. 1979. *Evaluation, Participation and Community Health Care Critique and Lessons.* APHA.

Khanna, R. 1992. *Taking Charge: Women's health as empowerment*. SAHAJ\SARTHI. Can be ordered from: SAHAJ, 1 Tejas Apartments, 53 Haribhakti Colony, Old Padra Road, Baroda-390 015, Gujarat, India.

Maguire, P. 1987. *Doing Participatory Research: A feminist approach.* The Centre for International Education, USA.

McLaren, P. and Leonard, P. 1993. *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter.* Routledge.

Welbourn, A. 1992. Rapid rural appraisal, gender and health - alternative ways of listening to needs. *IDS Bulletin* 23 (1). IDS, Sussex, UK.

7

Consensus or cover-up?
the limitations of group meetings

Johan Pottier and Patrick Orone

• **Introduction**

Wera-Angole in Soroti District, eastern Uganda is an area marked by two dramatic recent events: the end of the insurgency in 1991 and the virtual collapse of the area's agricultural base. Reasons for the collapse include the loss of all cattle following extensive cattle raids by the neighbouring Karimojong, the demise of the cotton market following mismanagement in the marketing cooperatives, and the outbreak of cassava mosaic.

In 1993 the Food Systems Under Stress (FSUS) project[1] held a participatory research workshop in Wera-Angole to help understand how food insecure groups and individuals perceive obstacles to food security. The workshop brought together social scientists, national planners, community workers, extensionists, some district-level officials and villagers who live and farm in that fragile environment.

The term 'workshop' in this paper refers to a series of focus group meetings and plenary sessions for conducting preliminary research. Meetings were spread out over three days, with the inclusion of transect walks at the end of the workshop. Participants were selected by the sub-county chief following a meeting with FSUS representatives. Equal numbers of women and men were chosen. Findings from this workshop have since served as the basis for formulating a long-term research proposal.

Stress factors in the food system were identified through the use of participatory appraisal methods (including resource mapping, seasonal calendars, daily activity profiles, small group discussions, problem ranking, income or expenditure pie charts, Venn diagramming, transect walks and market visits) and then ranked according to their perceived magnitude. The stress factors fell into three areas:

1. the inability to benefit from markets and to boost cash flows;
2. the changing nature of the resource base (loss of cattle, reduced production of food crops and cotton, loss of valuable trees); and,
3. institutional constraints (such as the lack of adequate support services).

The findings made during the workshop were marked by a general consensus that cut across the divisions of gender and age.

However we are concerned that information obtained in the public arena of a workshop, a common forum for PRA work, can hide disparate, multiple and muted voices. We ask what aspects of social reality were revealed to the researchers and what themes were left insufficiently explored. The latter, we argue, are themes that require further probing and greater familiarity with the local community, ie. more time for in-depth interviews and observation. Moreover, we consider whether the topics for further research should be answered *before* researchers become involved in the design of action plans.

• **Findings and unresolved issues**

In this section we examine the three main stress factors in the food system in more detail. We describe how the community members

present described their main problems and agreed on their causes and solutions. We then give examples of how this apparent consensus may have masked the views of others.

Gender relations and markets

The recent collapse of the rural economic base was triggered by the loss of cattle through raids. Having lost *all* their cattle, the people in Wera-Angole can no longer cultivate staple crops as extensively as they used to do, since they lack the labour to do by hand what they used animal traction for previously. The labour shortage is also caused by the number of men who died in the insurgency. Many women now have to do the jobs men used to do, such as ploughing. Improved food security in neighbouring villages has also reduced the range of available markets. Yet the villagers are anxious to rebuild their herds because the potential for agriculture remains very good. Rice, sorghum, millet, groundnuts and sugar could all be produced in abundance.

To cope with the loss of the cotton and cattle markets, many villagers now grow food crops that are also cash crops. These include groundnuts, sorghum, millet, beans and maize, but all are grown on much reduced areas. However, and on this point there was general agreement, the cash-starved villagers sell more than is good for their well-being, and do so at the worst possible prices.

Although everyone at the workshop spoke highly of the food-cash crops 'solution', and agreed that millet is the food/cash crop *par excellence,* it transpired during a transect walk that not everyone has the fertile land that millet requires. This observation led us to suggest that further research is needed into whether millet sales might not be a coping strategy preferred (ie. affordable) only by better-off villagers.

Discussion of millet and markets also resulted in another consensus, namely that since the cattle raids women now shoulder most of the financial responsibilities such as school and medical fees. The search for alternative market outlets is led by women. This has caused a major social revolution in terms of household relations.

To obtain cash, women brew and sell *ajon* (millet beer) or crude *waragi* (made of potatoes). A man said: *"Women now lead as income providers. Men cannot brew because these activities relate to the kitchen. It is the men who now come to the women and ask for money."*

Men explained that they tend to need more money for buying beer: *"What has made women leaders in income is also that men now spend too much money on* ajon. *Before the raids we had money and we also worked more land together. And there used to be plenty of beer during ceremonies. So we spent little money on beer, we did not have to."* Where does this money for beer now come from? From small group discussions we learned that the answer is not that the men ask women for money, as suggested above, but rather that men sell millet.

To explore this further, we asked in a plenary session what the men's need for beer money meant for the relationship between men and women. Was men's need for cash something that might contribute to food insecurity within the home? The plenary discussion strengthened the cohesive image of Wera-Angole. Women publicly stated that they were able to exert control over household food supplies and that men's ability to sell food from the granary was limited. Men are only allowed to sell food crops at times of plenty, ie. harvest times, when food prices are depressed. While millet is the crop which men are usually trying to sell, the decision to sell remains at the discretion of women. The men's silence on this issue indicated agreement. (Only on the last day, during the transect walk, did some men privately suggest that women could not sell any food without their husbands' consent. But such consent was easily given, they added).

Despite this public consensus, we felt there was clearly scope for tension between the food-conscious women who want to buy millet *from* the market (thus avoiding using home-grown crops) and their men/husbands who may want to sell home-grown millet *to* the market. Does spending money on *ajon* sour household relations as it syphons off hard-earned cash (mostly earned by women) that could be spent on feeding household

2

_____

members? We concluded that this is too important not to be investigated further.

An explanation for this public consensus may be that women could not really admit or discuss the issue without exposing men's financial weaknesses. Interestingly, in the *public* space of this participatory workshop, women pointed out that husbands must not be blamed for their reduced contribution to the food supply. Such exposure is inappropriate in public or in the presence of strangers (including PRA facilitators). Trust must first be built up, which takes time. Whether we worked in small groups or in a plenary session, the workshop was always a public space.

A diverse resource base

The closest that women came to discussing inter-household social differentiation in Wera-Angole was to comment: *"The problem here is not land availability but the distribution of fertility. Some households have fertile lands while others only have poor soils."* While details were not provided, and no individuals were named, women nevertheless elaborated that swampland is valued because gardens there retain moisture throughout the year, and millet and rice do well. Rice can be double cropped and millet sown in December is said to be excellent.

The influence of the skewed distribution of fertile land on household food security is not clear at present. However it was striking that workshop participants frequently referred to a 1956 by-law under which no one was allowed to cultivate within a radius of 400 steps from the edge of the swamp, to reserve this strip of land for cattle grazing. In theory, the law is still in force, people said, but now that the cattle have gone, *"some villagers"* are encroaching on the communal land and a system of individual tenure is emerging. What exactly is implied in this move towards a more individual approach to land tenure? Are any disputes going on? Not surprisingly perhaps, this question of inter-household differences was not the kind of issue participants wanted discussed at their *first* workshop. A further example of the need to probe into the difficult area of unequal access to resources is given in Box 1.

BOX 1
DIFFERENTIATED ACCESS TO WILD RESOURCES: THE SHEA TREE

The shea tree is allegedly on the verge of extinction. Shea (*Vitellaria paradoxa*), *ekunguru* in Ateso, grows on upland soils and its nuts provide excellent butter for cooking. Youths like to pick the nuts to make money for school fees. The tree's survival is threatened because the tree is good for charcoal making and because soldiers stationed in the area use its bark to smoke out mosquitoes in their camp at night. However, there is now restricted access to shea nuts. As with the rice land near the swamps (once communally used for grazing, but now increasingly considered private property), access to shea nuts is no longer on a free-for-all basis. *"Those who grow millet or sorghum near such trees now have first rights to their fruits and seeds"* one participant said.

After what we learned about the restricted access to shea nuts and about the increased encroachment on land on which food cropping used to be prohibited, it became clear that individual interests are manifest and that the conspicuous "cohesive front" during most of the workshop was masking important internal divisions. Regarding access to shea tree products, future researchers must ask: *"who decides who can grow millet near such lucrative trees?"* A whole story about unequal access to resources (land, labour, produce) is likely to unfold.

Institutional constraints

Most people agreed, although some individuals abstained, that certain government departments deserved heavy criticism. Circle (Venn) diagramming provided the context for discussing this. On one occasion, the Forestry Department came under fire:

"Although the staff are around, we receive no help with planting trees. Moreover, a lot of charcoal burning is taking place, for which the shea tree is used. The charcoal burners are destroying a tree that is very valuable to us as it provides us with income. The Forestry Department is doing nothing to stop the destruction..."

_____ 3

Fisheries, Health, Education and Water also came in for serious criticism. Fisheries staff allegedly show no interest in improving fishing technology, even though swamp fishing provides much needed income. The Health service was criticised because of its *"cost sharing"* policy (300 Ugandan shillings per consultation). The Education department was blamed for not paying its teachers on time. The Water department, although praised for having repaired certain boreholes in the area, was again criticised for not having added any.

While the discussions based on circle diagramming were frank and revealing, the exercise has its limitations. Answers should not be accepted at face value. Researchers need to probe deeper and learn about the complexity of the issues, addressing specific interactions between individual staff and individual farmers. It is quite feasible that power relations between, for example, extension workers and certain local farmers may colour people's responses when discussing more general institutional relationships. The attempts (either existing or anticipated) by extension workers to pull villagers into projects, or *vice versa*, can create a hidden agenda against which seemingly spontaneous discussions must be understood (Long and Long, 1992).

• **Provisional conclusions**

Before decentralised policy initiatives develop from reliable understandings of how poor people perceive their own food insecurity, their authors will need to be clear about social differentiation and how people interact and cope (Dzingirai, 1992; Pottier, 1995). The workshop described here led to a high level of participation and exchange of views, often with a clear sense that a forum for genuine dialogue had been set up. However, politics (between and within households) and real coping mechanisms were not and could not be discussed.

The major obstacle is that workshops, no matter how participatory they may be, are still public activities during which certain aspects of everyday social life must remain hidden from the outside world. Some coping strategies can be, and were, discussed openly, such as

selling food below its marketable value; food for work; collecting wild foods and so on. Others are not to be mentioned in public (theft; food for sex/marriage; poor people cheating each other when trading). Public discussion does not move beyond the ground rules, the safe discourse, the official model. It is therefore no more than a first step in learning about actual practices (Nuijtens, 1992).

The absent voices in the Soroti workshop were especially the 'private' voices, the things people say at home when the research team (from whom so much is expected!) is out of earshot. At the same time, but insufficiently highlighted in this article because of restricted space, we are also aware of the absence of the voices of very poor villagers. Very poor people did not take part in the workshop. We met some of them during the transect walk (eg. teenage parents), but they remained distant. With hindsight, it seems the very poor had not been invited by the sub-chief through whom invitations had been sent, quite simply because their presence was not deemed necessary.

Researchers must also realise that participatory research workshops present participants with a unique opportunity, that is, with a potential instrument for changing existing practices. This was clear in the Soroti workshop, where many participants were disappointed that the occasion could not be turned into a kind of instantaneous legislative body that would scrutinise, revive and implement the by-laws that were being ignored by some members of the community. In this respect, ironically, the workshop was not so much *"far removed from everyday practice"* (Nuijtens, 1992) as uncomfortably part of it.

This points to the most urgent issue: *at what point can researchers or facilitators feel sufficiently knowledgeable to justify advocating change?* To make continued involvement in transformative research ethically justifiable, the research questions raised in this article will need to be answered with urgency. It is our belief that only through more intensive, longer-term field research (Dzingirai, 1992) can we fully understand how poor people organise themselves in situations of food stress. In future research on Food Systems Under Stress (FSUS), researchers will need to answer the questions we have raised

before they align themselves with certain sections in 'the community' in support of the latter's quest for empowerment.

- **Johan Pottier,** School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK, and **Patrick Orone,** MISR, University of Makerere, PO Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda.

NOTES

1. *The Food Systems Under Stress* (FSUS) project was inintiated by Johan Pottier and funded by IDRC (Canada) and The Ford Foundation.

REFERENCES

Dzingirai, V. 1992. *Accumulation and Response: a study of peasant response to state exploitation.* Mphil thesis, University of Zimbabwe, Harare.

Long, N. and Long, A. 1992. *Battlefields of Knowledge: The Interlocking of Theory and Practice in Social Research and Development*. Routledge, London.

Nuitens, M. 1992. Local organisation as organising practices: rethinking rural institutions. In: Long, N. and Long, A (eds.). *Battlefields of Knowledge: The Interlocking of Theory and Practice in Social Research and Development*. Routledge, London.

Pottier, J. 1995. Perceptions of food stress and the formulation of sustainable food policies in rural Africa. In: Devisch, R., De Boeck, F. and Jonckers, D. (eds.). *Alimentations, Traditions et Developpements en Afriue Intertropicale*. L'Harmattan, Paris.

5

9

PRA, social tremors and rolling heads: thoughts on PRA and empowerment

Author Name

• How far should facilitators go?

Participation in social processes of analysis and planning can be an empowering experience, not only for the individuals and the community involved, but also a liberating if frequently tense experience for the facilitator. Communities are never socially and economically homogeneous, and most PRA exercises uncover conflicts of interest. Empowerment in such situations can reveal new and exciting avenues for development and change, out of which choices have to be made. The resolution of interests usually passes through tension on the way.

Empowerment also involves heightened exposure for individuals and communities to their social, political, and economic antagonists. This requires a sense of social responsibility on the part of the PRA facilitator. He or she must judge how much social danger is involved in this exposure, whether it can be used *constructively*, to improve livelihoods, or whether it should be avoided because it can be *destructive* of social relations and even of lives. The danger is that the PRA exercises will contribute to situations where social tensions are such that sanctions, censure and even physical threats are heightened, without any compensating positive change. A major preoccupation of PRA facilitators is thus how PRA-based work can also draw out the positive change in these situations.

A nutritionist colleague of mine in Guatemala still holds herself responsible for several violent deaths as a result of her over-zealous pursuit of 'Action-Reflection-Action' in the 1970s. Poor peasants had counted on her for protection against landowners when they protested against their feudal conditions, a protection she was unable to provide. In Honduras I myself had to withdraw from a discussion of land-occupation as a solution to hunger in Santa Barbara villages, pointing out that Save the Children Fund could not support nominally illegal activities, even though this might well be just, and certainly had potential for more local maize and bean production.

Being part of participatory discussions of what people perceive as crucial issues often presents facilitators with dilemmas about their own roles in social intervention. Are all PRA facilitators aware of this, and above all, experienced enough to know when to engage and when to withdraw?

The question of how far to go becomes particularly acute when working with representatives of a government which is seen by the people as *"the enemy"*. The UN agencies by definition only work with and through governments. Consequently, prompting participatory approaches in an agency like the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) is not without its professional and political conundrums.

• PRA in FAO

FAO's (World Bank-funded) Investment Centre has made systematic use of RRA methods for some years in an attempt to reduce the amount of time and funds spent on country and project assessment. However, the *participatory* use of RRA methods, and participatory approaches to development work

in general have been promoted and used by individual FAO officers only in specific projects, mostly within forestry and fisheries. These individual initiatives are finally achieving recognition within the organisation, and training in participatory approaches for higher-level officers is in progress.

My own use of PRA in FAO fisheries projects illustrated how important it is that project staff involved in PRA have some social knowledge in addition to their technical expertise.

Food and credit in Kaback, Guinea

An FAO project manager working in fisheries development off the coast of Guinea was concerned about the health of the local population. He was also concerned to encourage more democratic and participatory attitudes among his staff. We agreed to try and combine this with my own FAO task, which included improving food security in fishing communities, in an exploratory RRA exercise in the Kaback project.

Initially the four local staff members of varied backgrounds were sceptical, both of whether they could involve illiterate fisherpeople in any kind of study, and of their own ability to investigate food and eating without being experts

in nutrition. But by the time we got to Khunimodiya, they had relaxed into the process and had begun to enjoy seeing the different directions in which their discussions could go.

There we talked to a focus group of women fish-processors, wives of fishermen, who were keen to explain their food system. This involved some agriculture, including rice, fresh and smoked fish and items purchased with income from fish-smoking.

From their calendar (Table 1), constructed using pictures and heaps of small shells, it emerged that their major concern about food was not only getting enough rice to eat with their fish, but being able to eat their *own* rice, the taste of which they prefer. However, they could not store enough of their own rice each year as their husbands had to sell so much after the harvest to pay off fishing and household debts, a never-ending annual cycle. Enquiries elsewhere showed that this effect of the debt burden was general, with local variations, in all the fishing villages. Additionally, the calendar showed how irregular their own and household income was, compared to the very regular pay-back requirements of the project credit scheme. The Khunimodiya women presented the food and credit problems and their calendars at the team's final meeting. It was a revelation to the men and to the project staff how simply they could represent their cyclical economic difficulties, without having to write or

Table 1. Khunimodiya women's calendar, showing the main elements of household budgets						
Season	mist & fog	hot & dry	early rains	rains	late rain	clear skies
Own Rice	....	....	....	.....		....
Fish for Smoking	....	....	.....	....	....	....
Cash in	....	....	....	....	....	....
Cash out	....	....	....	....	....	....
	debt repayments			food debts		

even quantify them. Crucially, it clarified for the project credit officer why it was more difficult to get re-payment on loans at some times than others. In fact there had been some ill-feeling about this. On the eve of our arrival in the villages there had been turmoil when the credit officer posted photographs of the heads of those credit groups which had defaulted.

After the calendar presentations, the project management team sat down with community leaders and the few big farmers, with villager and project staff listening from a short distance, and discussed the feasibility of financing a physical rice-bank as an alternative or a supplement to arranging cash credits for rice sold outside the area. More importantly for household budgeting, and hopefully for food security, the credit officer toured the villages and drew similar locally detailed calendars with all the credit groups in order to adjust their re-payment periods to ease pressure during stress periods.

Credit and corruption in Kagera, Tanzania

During the start-up phase of an FAO artisanal fisheries project on the western side of Lake Victoria, supporting commercial development by Tanzania's Fisheries Department of the Nile Perch and sardinella fisheries, I spent a month facilitating an exploratory appraisal. The focus was nutrition and food security in the fishing communities. However, because fish is only a small part of local diets, it was important to encourage people to talk about the livelihoods that allow them access to staples (bananas, beans) and other food items.

In nearly every case these food-focused discussions led to three key preoccupations:

- the changing structure of small-scale fisheries;
- increasing domination by bigger fishermen with access to public and illegal funds; and,
- the concentration of the available credit in the hands of the better-off boatowners and government officials (how they saw the probable outcome of the FAO project).

The classification (Table 2) of fishermen and women emerged from focus group discussions with local fish-bosses, with men and women active in the boats and/or at the landings and processing sites, and with the pool of casual male and female labour. This classification also includes the land-based activities related to fishing, in which more women are engaged (processing, trading, servicing food/drink/other needs of the fishermen) and was accepted by all described in it.

Table 2. A classification of men and women involved in the Kagera artisanal fishing industry

Involvement in Fishing	Non-fishing work and Women
1. Big time boat-owners, with engines	No women
2. Owners of several boats, without engines	Only 2 women identified
3. Owners of one boat (no engine)	Small minority of women
4. Jobbing fishermen, with gear	Equivalent to women owning and running enterprises with fixed investment, like fish-smoking and bars
5. Jobbing fishermen, without gear	Equivalent to known traders, processors, transporters with only recurrent costs
6. Casual labour and drifters	Casual labour and 'tea room' and 'beer hall' sex workers

Disagreement focused on how many and which of the groups was entitled to cheap public/FAO credit. The appraisal work led to the further spreading of the loans, from current concentrations in categories 1 and 2, to cover categories 2, 4 and 5. However the fishermen feel strongly that only categories 3, 4 and 5 *"need"* loans.

As the research team became more experienced, and more interested in tensions they had previously felt but not understood, they uncovered layers of manipulation and corruption in the management of the credit team. Some involved officials of both the Fisheries Department and the credit agency (CRDB) selected by the FAO project to disburse funds. The heads of these local institutions were nominally part of the team but were always too busy to take part in field visits.

The corruption associated with credit came to a head on two occasions. One was in a village where the new mayor and the villagers complained of being unable to access credit for either fishing or trading due to insufficient physical collateral. They also accused the former mayor and the local fisheries officer of charging such high illegal 'stamp duty' on their applications for small loans that it was not worth their while pursuing them.

Some muttered they would set the *sungu-sungu* (traditional vigilante) on the credit agency representative if he came to the village again (ie. lynch him). Meanwhile, they wanted to propose their own criteria for loan-worthiness to the FAO/Fisheries project, through a system of village council guarantees of known *bona fide* and hard-working fishermen and women processors and traders.

Corruption was also revealed when the team subsequently urged the expatriate and national project management to scrutinise the list of proposed recipients of project credit before it was made public, and take measures to ensure a fair distribution of loans among different types of fishing activities. This caught the project management in an awkward position, between the local establishment who accepted the corruption, and the official project clients, the fisher communities.

It was clear from the draft list that the villagers were right: three of the biggest loans were to go to officials not currently involved in fisheries, the only woman recipient proposed on the list was one of these officials, and none of the proposed loans were for fishermen who did not already own at least three boats and an outboard motor.

Local members of the team were nervous about taking the issue further, for fear of losing their jobs or other consequences. However, they felt it was such an important issue for local government as well as the fishing communities that they pursued it, but through one of their own 'outsiders', a temporary staff member seconded from Dar es Salaam. He made it clear to the project management that both FAO and the Fisheries Department would be totally discredited in the villages if the loan proposals went ahead.

The publication of the project loans was postponed. As I left Bukoba, crisis meetings

between local government, the parastatal credit agency and the project were being held. The upshot was that non-fishing officials were removed from the list, some one-boat owners and women's marketing groups were added, and the credit fund agent went on holiday. To my knowledge, none of the project staff who took part in the appraisal has suffered repercussions from the pressure they put on the loan process.

• **Discussion**

Both appraisal teams, in Guinea and Tanzania, faced up to tensions within the communities and hostility between the communities and their project employers. Members of both teams commented that this was not an exercise *"for students"*, since much of the facilitating involved social judgements one could only expect from experienced professionals. For many, this was a more important finding than the feeling that they had learned from using particular methods and that their own local knowledge had grown with the experience.

Although both outcomes were happy ones for the projects concerned, the social implications are different. The Guinea experience is a positive tale of PRA facilitating or precipitating change and intervention which might have taken place anyway, given the interest of the project management and the dedication of the project staff.

In Tanzania however, the team's fortuitous timing saved FAO and the local administration from a serious error in accepting corruption. Whereas the Guinea staff risked little more than continuing hostility over debt repayments had they not reached an amicable solution to the credit issue, the Tanzanian staff would not have been able to go back to those villages where corruption had been discussed without themselves being lynched for complicity.

This article has described two examples of potential conflicts which were resolved constructively. However this is not always the case, which points to the need to anticipate that most participatory research will uncover conflicts of interest. Do facilitators and researchers have the skills to deal with such situations?

• **Judith Appleton,** c/o 7 South Ridge, Odiham, Nr Basingstoke, Hampshire RG25 1NG, UK.

5

9

Participatory methods: precipitating or avoiding conflict?

Parmesh Shah and Meera Kaul Shah

- ## Introduction

Some of the articles appearing in this issue of *PLA Notes* and elsewhere indicate that the use of PRA methodology does not provide an adequate understanding of the social relations, and especially the tensions between various social groups in a community. As PRA tries to build consensus in the community at the end of the appraisal process, the complexity of social relationships, which can inhibit community action and articulation of joint priorities and subsequently joint action, are said to be overlooked, creating a false sense of a community willing to cooperate. A related issue often mentioned is that PRA as a methodology is not geared towards highlighting and resolving conflicts within the community.

This article is based on our own experience and those of others who have used PRA for a long term process of local institutional development. First we describe some factors which inhibit many practitioners from using PRA as part of an effective process which recognises and handles conflict as an inherent component of participatory development. Using examples from India we then illustrate situations where the use of PRA has led to conflicts and describe how the process was managed in different institutional contexts.

- ## Moving beyond appraisals

PRA is often interpreted narrowly as the use of appraisal methods leading to the production of a village plan and a final village meeting indicating community consensus. This has prevented many practitioners from exploiting the full potential of the process. For many of

us PRA is a part of a long term complex process of engagement involving negotiations, bargaining, dialogue and conflict resolution. Unfortunately most writing on these issues is done by Western academics who use PRA methods for a very short time, mainly during appraisals (5 to 7 days), and who are generally absent when negotiation and bargaining takes place and conflicts surface. Also, most researchers are more interested in extracting information and have short processes of engagement. For most of these people, the production of a glossy report is sufficient to build their careers. They have little stake in observing and handling conflict as it emerges, due to the short term nature of their engagement and low commitment to action as result of their focus on predominantly on research.

- ## The quality and intensity of facilitation

The use of any type of participatory methods in handling conflict situations is dependent on the quality and intensity of facilitation. At the risk of repeating ourselves, we reiterate that intensive and sustained interaction is required to facilitate the process of negotiation, bargaining and conflict resolution, long after the initial appraisal is over. While it may be relatively easy for anyone to facilitate the use of PRA methods, the skills needed for the facilitation of negotiation and conflict management are very different. Having said that, there are many examples of PRA adaptation for negotiation and conflict management in an institutional context of long term engagement and local institutional development. As most good facilitators of these processes do not enjoy writing, academics everywhere have a field day writing

1

articles based on only limited understanding and capacity for facilitation.

• **The institutional objective**

The management of any participatory process also depends on the objective and mission of the facilitating institution. If a support organisation values empowerment of the poor, and is willing to make it a major objective it will have to take risk, allow conflict to surface and then enable the marginalised groups to manage the process. If the objective of the support institution is to develop an overall village institution it will try to create a consensus between various groups. Both require negotiation but the first might lead to conflict and the second might lead to a compromise. Most external donors and short term consultants have a low capacity to take risk within the shorter time frames in which they operate. They thus end up using PRA methods for very narrow ends like production of plans and reports and are rarely able to initiate a long term process of institutional development.

Box 1 details an experience where a participatory process led to conflict and describes how it was managed.

Other examples of the use of PRA for catalysing negotiations on issues of conflict and equity relate to sharing water resources from lift irrigation projects in some villages of Bharuch district in Gujarat. Initial appraisal processes in some of these villages revealed that even though a number of households were landless, they are involved in farming as share-croppers or as tenant farmers. However, since they own no land of their own, they are not eligible to join the lift irrigation cooperative societies, which means that they have no access to the irrigation water. Given its limited availability, especially during the summer season and at times during winter, water has to be rationed according to the water rights of the cooperative members. Owning no land, coupled with no water rights would have further deteriorated the condition of the landless. After the appraisal process and subsequent negotiations about the resultant increase in income from making irrigation water available, the landed farmers were ready to share water equally from the lift irrigation programme. This enabled the landless to sell water to the farmers and negotiate share-cropping arrangements where landless could get a higher share by share-cropping as they provided labour and water, two key inputs for increasing production. This could not have been achieved if the facilitating organisation did not have equity as an important objective. This enabled it to use PRA to precipitate negotiations on implications of the process of equal sharing of water.

During the appraisal process in one of these villages where a lift irrigation project was being proposed, it was realised that with only a marginal additional investment the irrigation pipes could easily be extended to cover the small homestead plots used by women to grow one rainfed crop of vegetables and a little maize. The women felt confident that with irrigation they would be able to grow vegetables all year round. Members dug the channels to lay the pipes and the women had access to the irrigation water at the same time as men got it for their main agricultural fields. Conflicts surfaced as men argued that their main crop was more important than the vegetables and other crops grown by the women on their tiny homestead plots. As a result, they argued, women should not be allowed to irrigate their plots till the men had irrigated all their fields. Having no bargaining power with the village men, most of the women lost their winter vegetable crop the first year. During a participatory review of the performance of the irrigation project in the village, the women said that they had lost their crops while the men were rejoicing about the wheat crop they had been able to grow for the first time. The women threatened to withdraw their membership from the irrigation cooperative. With the support from the NGO, a compromise was finally reached, whereby women members would be treated equally to male members and would have the same rotation of turns, provided

BOX 1
PARTICIPATION LEADING TO VIOLENCE AND DEATH

Devalia in Surendranagar District of Gujarat, India is a highly caste stratified village. Rajputs have traditionally owned the large fields and control most common property resources, including water. Gadvis, with their small land holdings form the lowest rung of the local caste hierarchy. Rajputs control most surface water resources in an area which is categorised by low rainfall and cyclical droughts. As a result most Gadvis find it difficult to grow one rainfed crop annually and end up working as labourers for the Rajputs at very low wages.

During a participatory appraisal of the natural resources in the village, facilitated by an NGO, the village map showed that the Gadvis had little access to the surface water resources. The Rajputs explained that improving surface water resources was a priority for them and also indicated the need to dig new wells on their lands. The Gadvis prepared a separate map and showed where they wanted to construct a community well, adding that they were willing to contribute towards its cost. The NGO engineers then went on a transect walk with the different groups in the community and identified three locations suitable for constructing new wells. One of these was located on land owned by the Gadvi community and the others were on Rajput lands. This information was presented and discussed at the end of the appraisal and the groups were asked to indicate their contribution and their terms of participation in the process.

A complex process of negotiation and bargaining lasting two to three weeks took place between the groups and between the NGO and the groups. The Rajput group told the Gadvi group that they should not contribute any of their resources for constructing the well and should try to seek 100% assistance from the NGO. From their past experience, the Gadvis knew that the Rajputs, due to their links with local politicians and bureaucrats, had usurped most of the external assistance available to the village. The Gadvis decided to contribute 33% of the total cost in cash, to provide voluntary labour for the construction and to take a Bank loan for the remaining amount. This commitment by the Gadvi group forced the Rajputs to agree to similar conditions in a village meeting.

As per the terms of the agreement, the NGO was committed to start supporting the group which was able to collect its cash contribution first and which was prepared to take up management responsibilities. The Gadvis were ready within a fortnight, and given the equity concerns of the NGO, it was felt more appropriate to start with supporting the most marginalised group in the village. The group of seven Gadvis started constructing their community well and struck water within 10 days. They developed a land use plan and map and had started preparations for cultivating in the winter season. The Rajputs was annoyed by the process. They had lost their cheap wage labourers from the Gadvi community as the group was no longer dependent on them for employment. At least six to seven meetings were organised during this period for negotiating and bargaining.

While the Gadvis were still working on their community well, they were ambushed and brutally beaten up by a group of Rajputs one afternoon. Two of the Gadvis died on the spot and others sustained serious injuries. The worst fears of the NGO staff and the Gadvi community had come true. The Rajputs, who held economic and political power, did not want to see the Gadvis improve their economic situation, which would have also meant breaking their ties of dependence with the Rajputs. The NGO facilitators felt horrified about having initiated the PRA and supporting the subsequent action in Devalia without realising its implications. It took some time for the NGO and the Gadvi leaders in Devalia to restart a dialogue on the issue. However the Gadvi community leaders felt that these deaths should not stop the NGO carrying out appraisals separately with their community and initiating similar programmes. Since then the NGO spends more time on facilitating negotiations between different groups in the community before supporting programmes. Tensions still emerge between various groups but there is a better understanding of the consequences and impact on social relations.

Mapping and discussions around maps in Devalia were only a starting point for a complex round of negotiations and action which in this case led to an extreme form of conflict. PRA precipitated the conflict and the process led to violence and death, despite the negotiations. PRA is not a class neutral methodology. It can be used to initiate activism by disadvantaged groups to force action on equity aspects. But it can enable an understanding of differences and conflict between various social groups, and can also be used effectively by sensitive facilitators to manage the conflict in a constructive manner.

_____

all the women were ready to use the irrigation water the same day in order to minimise loss of time and water. There are many other examples of similar negotiations conducted using PRA methods to catalyse discussion on equity issues, often creating conflict in the short run. These involve giving a higher share to disadvantaged groups in employment, ground water budgeting and management, watershed management, allocation of surplus common land to the scheduled castes (socially marginalised and oppressed groups), forest protection by men and women and management of buffer zones in national parks. In most cases the facilitating organisations worked with a longer time frame, the facilitators were experienced and had worked in the facilitating organisation for a long time and the organisation was committed to more equitable processes and institutions and the empowerment of disadvantaged groups.

• **Conclusions**

The present practice of using PRA methods over a short period and mostly in training situations is counterproductive for developing indigenous institutions. The continuous use of external short term consultants and academics who have never managed a development programme or process over a long period results in bad practice. Most critical writing on these issues is based on short term observation or research. It is high time that the resources spent by donors and academic institutions on researching the impact of this bad practice are used instead for sustaining and highlighting examples of good practice where PRA is used as a part of a long term process involving appraisal, negotiation, conflict management and action resulting in development of local capacity for problem solving rather than creating continued dependence on external consultants. Will we continue to make careers from writing about bad practice or can we do something to change the practice?

- **Parmesh Shah** and **Meera Kaul** Shah**,** c/o Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK.

10

Linking PRA-based research to policy

Victoria Johnson

• Linking research to policy

To make research relevant and accessible to policy makers at different levels of decision-making, three processes need to run in parallel: detailed field research, policy research and dissemination.
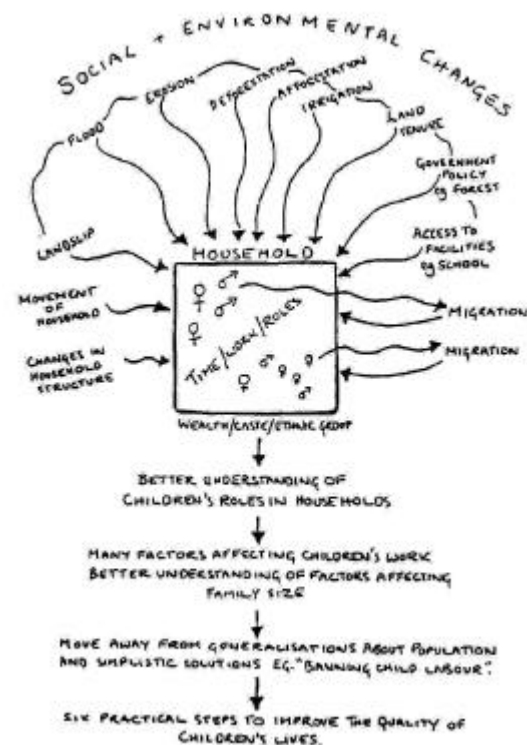
In this article I describe these different processes in the context of an ACTIONAID research project on children's roles in development[1]. These reflections aim to encourage those engaged in field level PRA work to consider how this does or does not, and can or can not, influence policies. It is in the influencing of policies that lasting changes can be brought about. I conclude by highlighting some of the problems with these processes and with linking practice to policy.

Listening to smaller voices

The research project aimed to provide detailed primary data to understand children's roles in the household: how girls and boys share their work burdens with adults and how these burdens change with environmental and socio-economic change. We wanted to move away from policy debates rife with generalisations about population and environment and away from simplistic solutions, such as the immediate banning of all child labour. The research findings led to a suggested programme of work which offers six practical steps to improve the quality of children's lives (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Children's work

• Issues for detailed field research

Detailed research was carried out in Sindhuli District of Nepal. Participatory methods, including different types of interviews, time allocation studies and observation techniques were used to understand the lives of villagers. The identification of more sensitive and innovative approaches to studying the roles of men, women girls and boys, has been a positive and exciting aspect of the research. Details of methods used, including the use of songs and dreams or aspirations of children, are described in the final report.

It was important to plan the field research in an area where ACTIONAID would be working in the near future. Thus the research findings would feed directly into the practical programming policies and also be relevant to the ongoing policy discussions at the national level, within ACTIONAID Nepal. This approach moves research away from being a purely extractive exercise towards a process which feeds into programme planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. To link the research to practical programming and policy, there were discussions and workshops held throughout the research period with ACTIONAID staff, both in Sindhuli and in the national office. Representatives from local NGOs, such as the Society for Participatory Cultural Education (SPACE) and Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN) were also closely involved in these discussions. The workshops focused on:

- History and objectives of the research;
- Relevant local cultural, political and ecosystem conditions; and,
- Methodology.

These helped to understand the research context better and to discuss the relevance of findings for the different programme areas and organisations. Thus the policy implications and recommendations could continue to be modified through the process of the research.

• Issues for policy research

While the detailed field research was being conducted in Nepal, a complementary process of policy research and discussions was carried out. One aspect of this was to draw on examples from ACTIONAID research and programme work in the Gambia, Kenya, Uganda, Ecuador, Peru, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. Attitudes to the different roles of girls and boys in rural and urban development programmes were thus explored in different settings where a range of different approaches have been taken.

Another element of the policy research was to identify some of the written policies of relevant organisations and international agencies, such as UNICEF, the International Labour Office (ILO) and donor governments. In this way different policy perspectives were established as a starting point for further discussions with these agencies. It was also important to learn from practical examples of child focused programme approaches. Examples included CWIN, Redd Barna and the Undugu Society (Kenya) to show best practice for further policy discussions.

Using the field and policy research, practical steps were identified to improve the quality of children's lives via programme work. The first step suggested was to improve internal agency policy. The research highlighted the need for attitudinal changes to development planning and for modified organisational procedures if a better understanding of what children 'think and do' is to change policy and practice. In this step, principles of participation and the types of participatory approaches which can be built on are discussed. The first step also includes a discussion of the importance of child-focused indicators for monitoring and evaluation, and gender/age awareness training.

Both practical action at local level and supportive action at national and international levels are discussed in the other steps. An important step to improve the quality of children's lives is to advocate change at all levels. This includes influencing donor government and national action within the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

• **Issues for dissemination**

It is essential to plan dissemination at the start of the research. This should run alongside the rest of the research activities and can include research into the relevant contacts and how to pitch the information for different audiences. It is important that the dissemination not only feeds back to people with whom the research is done, but also spreads out to inform different programmes and policy debates (Figure 2).

It is also important to ensure that information is packaged in different ways for different types of audience. Some of the more anecdotal information at an early stage of the research in Nepal was used for feature articles in magazines and educational packs for schools. This is an important component to consider for a development agency in which public education and support are a priority.

Research issues and methodology can also be shared and disseminated in different fora before the research ends to stimulate interest in the subject area and think through potential policy implications. Throughout the research programme important contacts were entered onto a database. These contacts consisted of interested and influential people, although they are not necessarily the same. Everyone was invited to the final symposium and sent the report and other relevant information.

It is important to think of the production of a detailed report and its launch as the beginning of a process of research and development, rather than the end of the work. The final report, *Listening to Smaller Voices*, was produced for those interested and working in sustainable development, in offices and in the field. It was a priority to present the information in an accessible way. The role of the designers in the production of an attractive and readable reports was vital for drawing people into the subject.

Planning national workshops and symposia in both Nepal and London took time. Such dissemination and policy influencing activities should be planned for at the start of the work programme. Lynda Chalker, the Minister for Overseas Development in the UK, opened the

Symposium in London. This was followed by a carefully balanced series of talks to give the full flavour of the research objectives, findings and policy implications, and to place this in the context of broader policy debates at national and international levels. The presentation and accessibility of the talks were again thought to be important to keep the audience of policy decision-makers and practitioners interested. The speech made by Lynda Chalker has now been published by the UK Overseas Development

Figure 2. Disseminating research findings
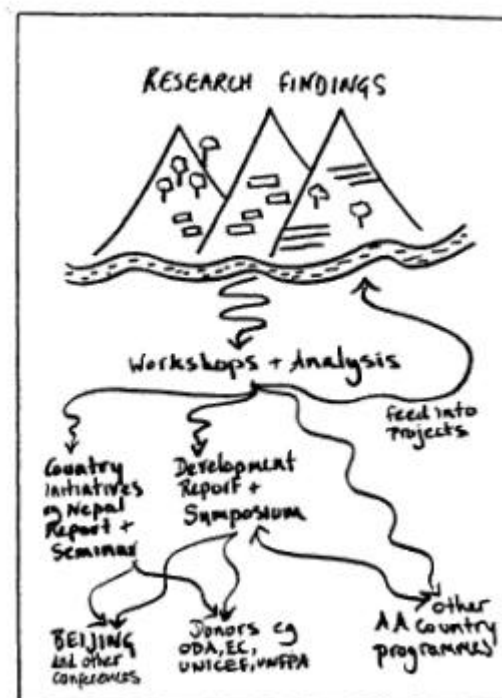
Administration (ODA, 1995). The parallel event in Nepal was planned by ACTIONAID Nepal and made relevant to the national and international organisations working within Nepal. A special edition of the report was also produced in a style in which ACTIONAID Nepal felt was accessible to their audience.

We followed up with letters to gauge the response to the work. This letter was sent to ACTIONAID representatives from NGOs, academics, international agencies and members of donor governments. The way in which ACTIONAID and other development practitioners take into account a more child-

3

sensitive approach to their programming has continued to be assessed and evaluated.

• **Lessons learnt**

The field and policy research and the dissemination processes we followed certainly raised problems. I want to highlight some of them here, and to look also at how PRA practice can be linked to policy in the work on children's roles in development.

Imposing research topics

If the topic is a relatively new area of investigation and has hitherto been 'invisible' in the development process, this can make the organisations involved reluctant to take it up. This was the case when exploring how children take an active role in household survival strategies and when examining their daily work burdens. Children's research has tended more towards more visible issues such as their exploitation in factories or the difficulties faced by street children.

Discussing the issue of children's invisible roles in development at national and international fora such as the 1992 Earth Summit and in the lead up to the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, laid the ground for linking research to policy. However, despite initial support for the issue and a recognition of its importance by ACTIONAID Nepal, some of the staff involved in PRA still resisted prioritising it.

Discussing and sharing experiences in workshops with staff within the organisation and from other NGOs was an important way of overcoming this resistance. This helped to ensure that the issue was being tackled from the point of view of the field staff in the countries involved in the study. There is still the question of how seriously issues such as age and gender are taken by different levels of staff throughout such an organisation, both in the head and field offices. Linking research to external policy and advocacy work thus needs to be coupled with an internal process of understanding and capacity building.

PRA: an end in itself?

From the start, we stressed the need for an open approach to understanding people's lives and specifically what children 'think and do'. A range of participatory and other methods are suitable for this. However, instead of exploring an issue using a range of methods, some staff seemed to feel that PRA was the 'only way'. They applied the methods with a degree of rigidity and automation. There seems to be a tendency to look on PRA as an end in itself, as a pure and unpolluted new idea. This is incompatible with the need for an open approach to gain an understanding of complex and sensitive inter-and intra-household interactions.

Before getting PRA training, some of the field staff involved seemed more flexible, imaginative about and open to ideas about the potential use of PRA to explore children's roles. Ideas about the suitability of methods can unfortunately become more rigid after training. It took some time to realise that, for example, some methods suitable for adults may not be suitable for children, and to test new possibilities. However, in the end, the initiative, patience and enthusiasm of the field staff on the project helped us arrive at an effective mix of methods for our children-focused research.

Diversity convinces

Diagramming methods, focused interviews, questionnaires and anthropological techniques such as time allocation and direct observation, were useful for linking practice to policy. Policy makers were able to look at the situation from different angles using both general and specific case study observations. Attractive visuals, such as maps, diagrams and children's drawings were included in the report. These helped to draw people into the final analysis. Case studies and the aspirations of individual children were backed up with general observations made in group work. A questionnaire, used to understand the head of household perspectives on issues of environmental and social change, provided background information and was used to compare with later findings from other methods.

Raising expectations

It is important to acknowledge and understand the different expectations of different actors in practice and policy arenas so as to provide information in a suitable form at an appropriate time for their needs.

Research may raise expectations, not only among the people in local communities, but also within an organisation, such as the public relations and fundraising sections or those involved in programme planning. This can often put pressure on those in the field to draw conclusions before the work has even begun and to feel that the answers and solutions should be known before the situation is properly understood. There needs to be a balance when linking these different concerns. Varying levels of information and distinct outputs can help the relevant people understand the process and analysis to date, but uninformed solutions should not be forced.

Sharing

The value of sharing ideas and information with other people and organisations working on similar issues is of the utmost importance for influencing lasting change. There can be competition between agencies for publicity and funding sources. However, in the area of influencing policy there are great advantages in learning from others' experiences and practices and then, where there is agreement, backing each other up in policy statements and advocacy.

In conclusion, there are ways to make research accessible to policy makers at different levels through parallel processes of field research, policy research and dissemination. There are still, however, many problems to overcome. These include attitudes to using a diversity of methods, and the ways in which people approach their work within different organisational contexts. These should continue to be discussed so that we can all learn from the experience of others and link more effectively PRA practice with policy change.

- **Victoria Johnson,** c/o Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK.

REFERENCE

ODA. 1995. Children: Seen but not heard. Implications for ODA's work with children in partner countries. Baroness Chalker's speech to ACTIONAID Symposium, 28 March 1995. ODA, London.

11

Making the best of going to scale

Robert Chambers

- ## Introduction

Predictably, PRA is being demanded on a large scale. Large donor organisations, Northern NGOs and large NGOs in the South are increasingly coming to use, and encouraging or requiring the use of, PRA approaches and methods in their projects and programmes. The role call is impressive. It includes FAO, IFAD, UNDP, UNICEF, and the World Bank; CIDA, DANIDA, FINNIDA, GTZ, NORAD, ODA, SDC, and SIDA; ACORD, ACTIONAID, CARE, Christian Aid, Farm Africa, Ford Foundation, Intercooperation, NOVIB, OXFAM, PLAN International, Redd Barna, SCF, World Vision, World Neighbours and the World Resources Institute. It also includes large Southern NGOs, BRAC, MYRADA and others, as well as thousands of smaller NGOs. And any listing like this, by one person, is bound to leave out other major actors (to whom I apologise). Less well recognised, government departments in the South are increasingly adopting PRA and requiring its use on a wide scale, not least in forestry, poverty programmes, soil and water conservation and watershed management, water and sanitation, and urban programmes.

Scale has already been achieved. To identify the poorest, and select and deselect households in poverty programmes, well-being ranking was used by MYRADA in the early 1990s in hundreds of villages in South India, and later by ACTIONAID for a population of some 36,000 in Pakistan. Staff of ACTIONAID, Nepal, in 1991 facilitated participatory evaluation of activities they had supported in some 130 villages (Phuyan, 1992). In Kenya, the Soil and Water Conservation Branch of the Ministry of Agriculture has for six years been developing and extending a participatory approach to watershed planning and management (Thompson, forthcoming). In India, Forest Departments have widely adopted Joint Forest Management in which PRA approaches and methods are a significant element, by now probably with thousands of communities. In Integrated Pest Management in Indonesia, at least 1,500 groups of farmers have made participatory maps which they use to plot the location and prevalence of pests, to plan action, and to monitor changes (Russ Dilts, pers. comm.). Again in Indonesia, from late 1994 through early 1995, as a component of a poverty alleviation programme, PRA activities were conducted in 285 of the poorest and most remote villages (some requiring a three-day walk to reach) in four months from the first training of trainers. In Vietnam, an IFAD-supported programme has carried out 350 activities described as PRAs (but using questionnaires!) in less than six months. And there are now quite numerous other examples.

Proposals by some government departments to go to scale are now formidable. In Kenya, the Soil and Water Conservation Branch of the Ministry of Agriculture is proposing in the 1995-96 financial year to launch participatory planning in 809 catchments covering 177,000 hectares and 93,000 farm families (Thompson, forthcoming).

In India, PRA approaches and methods have been incorporated in the guidelines for the national programme for watershed management, intended eventually for some 30,000 villages in 300 districts in 22 states, covering an ultimate 15 million hectares. This began with the training of 336 state-level trainers from 56 training institutions in 14 four-week courses conducted between April and August 1995. The trainings were to have no lectures, and to include a week on PRA,

1

with 3-4 days in villages. A multi-media package has been prepared for the ultimate training of 12,000 field staff.

In Indonesia, the use of PRA is being considered for a new anti-poverty programme which is proposed for over 2,000 villages with UNICEF support, and for 20,000 villages in another Government programme. And there are other examples from India, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Vietnam and elsewhere.

• Questions of quality

The trend seems set to continue. Short of massive negative experiences or some freak change of fashion, more and more field departments of government and other large organisations will seek to adopt and apply PRA approaches and methods on a large scale in the months and years to come.

This presents dangers and opportunities. Recent experience and analysis have shed light on the institutional problems presented by participatory approaches, and their implications for strategy (Kar and Backhaus 1994; Samaranayake 1994; Backhaus and Wagachchi 1995; Thompson forthcoming; Guijt, 1995). Going to scale raises acute questions of quality assurance. Shortcomings have included:

- neglect of behaviour and attitudes;
- top-down training in classrooms by people without field orientation or experience;
- opportunists claiming to be trainers, or to 'use PRA' when they are not aware of empowerment issues (some university academics have been among the worst offenders);
- reward systems which stress targets for disbursements and for physical achievements (often donor-driven);
- rushing in and out of communities in order to achieve preset targets for villages covered and sums disbursed;
- routine and ritual use of methods;
- one-off extractive appraisal without analysis, planning or action;
- interaction only or mainly with those who are better off and men

- overriding bottom-up priorities with predetermined top-down packages
- labelling conventional questionnaires as 'PRA'; and even
- the fabrication of 'outputs'!

Concerns about practices such as these have been repeatedly raised by PRA trainers and others (see *Sharing our Concerns* in *PLA Notes* 22). These errors have sometimes been recognised and embraced. Approaches, corrections and changes which have had or have promised positive outcomes include:

- increased priority given to behaviour and attitudes in training;
- more time for participation and institution-building in the early stages of programmes and projects, with bigger budgets for training, and less for infrastructure;
- tenacious and persistent internal working groups, as for participation in the World Bank, and as for RRA and PRA in FAO;
- no targets for disbursements or coverage, and provision that unspent budgets can be rolled forward from year to year;
- changes in project procedures to provide for participation and diversity;
- a process approach permitting continuous revisions to on-going projects;
- preceding, not following, LFA (logical framework analysis) or ZOPP with PRA activities involving the poor, women, and marginal groups in their own analysis, identifying their own priorities;
- starting on a pilot and experimental basis in part of an organisation, or in one geographical area;
- continuity over years with an outside facilitating organisation; and,
- stability in supportive senior management.

Together these contribute to a shift towards more participatory management cultures in organisations.

• A moment of choice

The fact that so many organisations are going to scale confronts those of us engaged in the development and spread of participatory approaches and methods with choices and

dilemmas. Each of us has to decide for ourselves what it is best to do. What follows is a personal view, and I may be wrong. Reader, please decide for yourself.

A major personal decision is where to act on the continuum between the small and beautiful, and the big and blotchy. This can be expressed as three options.

The first option is to go for the small and secure. Quality can be assured by working on a small scale with a very few communities. This can be both personally satisfying and professionally safe. Intense local engagement can also explore the potentials of PRA and generate innovations at the community level.

The second or middle option is extended engagement with particular organisations at a district or regional level, working over months and years in support of participatory approaches and incremental organisational change. This permits PRA to influence institutional culture, and can generate insights into the means and potentials for institutional change.

The third course is to work with organisations which are going to bigger scale quickly. This involves trade-offs. The principle is that the best should not be the enemy of the good or of the less bad. This course may be risky. There will be abuses and deceptions. Critics will not be few. Compromises will have to be made. Negative academics will find plenty to expose and be wise about. To accept the challenge of scale does, then, require courage.

In my view, all three approaches are needed and are complementary. Each of us will make our own choices, using our own best judgements. As ever, pluralism seems the best way forward, with different people doing different things in different places, some on a small scale, intensively, some with sustained commitment and engagement in the middle range, and others on a large scale, extensively, with all sharing experience and learning from each other.

Given the risks and inevitable defects, the case needs to be put for working with the third option, accepting the challenge of going quite fast to scale. I would argue that becoming

involved in an imperfect process, where abuses and errors may at first abound, can be personally and professionally responsible. Two reasons stand out.

First, the benefits to poor people can be greater from doing less well on a wide scale than from doing better on a small scale. The total gain to poor people may be much greater through initiating and supporting small changes in large organisations and programmes than through big gains in small programmes and programmes. Real world alternatives and causal chains are complex and uncertain, but the recognition of trade-offs between quality, scale and impact has, I believe, to be part of responsible decisions about where to work and what to do.

Second, in going to scale, even when much goes wrong, there may be benign viruses in PRA (behaviour and attitudes, handing over the stick, 'they can do it', 'use your own best judgement at all times', and so on) which can gain a foothold in large organisations, and then start to work away and spread. Bureaucratic structure can be exploited. In a large-scale watershed programme, for example, it can be required that the maps used for planning must be made by, and retained by, farmers. This has the potential to force staff to facilitate, to startle staff with what farmers can do, and to empower farmers in the planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation process. In the longer-term, benign viruses may contribute to more participatory procedures, management styles and organisational cultures. There will also be some, in every organisation, for whom the approach and methods are legitimating and liberating, allowing and enabling them to interact and facilitate in new, empowering ways from which they would otherwise be barred.

Experience to date suggests the importance of long-term engagement between an individual, team or training NGO and any large organisation which seeks to adopt a participatory approach. There is no quick fix. The in-out consultancy can sow seeds but most likely they will wither. The watershed programmes in Kenya and India which are going to scale are both building on five to six years of experience and engagement with other

organisations which have supported change with training, experiment and learning from experience. Similarly, the SIDA-supported government programme in Northern Vietnam has received sustained support and training from the same joint team over at least four years. Those who become involved with going to scale would do well to reflect on the implications of these similar experiences.

What is happening, and going to happen, demands personal decisions. Things are happening fast. Spread seems to be exponential. The word "URGENT" is overworked. But both chaos theory and common sense indicate that there are times and places when small shifts have big effects later, moving whole systems into different paths and spaces. I sense this to be one such time. My best judgement is that what is done, and not done, during the next few months and years, will, seen and unseen, have huge effects, in fact or by default, in future decades; and that many of these effects or lack of effects will apply to women, the poor and the marginalised. The question is whether we have the vision, judgement and guts to see and do the right things now.

• A programme of action

Let me propose a programme of action:

Draw up a personal code of ethics, either individually, or in small groups of professionals, to guide decisions and actions. This could include 'uncompromisables', sticking points on which we will not yield, for those of us involved in going to scale.

Hang in with a big programme over a matter of years, trying to slow it when it is too fast, establishing footholds, supporting those who wish to change, and helping those in power to shift the steering wheel bit by bit in a more participatory direction.

Stress behaviour and attitudes again and again as centrally important, including self-critical awareness and learning, embracing error, sitting down, listening and learning, not interrupting, facilitating.

Develop, innovate, improve, share and apply behaviour and attitude training modules and materials (URGENTLY).

Train other trainers, with critical learning and improvement through feedback from trainers trained, those trained by them, and the experience of field action.

Observe, record and learn from the experience of participatory research going to scale in big organisations, warts and all, and sharing the insights widely.

Encourage self-evaluations and critical reflection within organisations.

Work with the "benign virus" effect; improve the viruses and their insertion and spread.

Build alliances and share experiences with all the above to be sensitive, sustained and efficient between actors at all levels, between organisations, and between countries and continents.

All this demands participatory research, learning, sharing and training. As things are, I do not think we are anywhere near being able to meet the needs of the time. People in the future may look back and wonder how and why we were so slow to act, and acted on such a small scale, when the opportunities were so vast.

The *Book of Common Prayer* begins its confession with errors of omission: *"We have left undone those things which we ought to have done"*. Where governments and other large organisations are going to scale, we are faced with a choice: whether to get involved or not. The stakes are high. Scope abounds for errors of omission. Not to act is a choice, itself an action. I have expressed a personal view in this note. Have I got it right, or wrong?

Each of us has to use our own best judgement. What is yours? What is right for you?

• **Robert Chambers,** Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, Sussex, BN1 9RE, UK.

_____

REFERENCES

Backhaus, C. and Wagachchi, R. 1995 "Only playing with beans?" Attempting to introduce a participatory approach into a large-scale government rural development programme in Sri Lanka. In: Kievelitz, U. and Scherler, C. (eds.) *Participatory Learning Approaches in Multisectoral Projects: Experiences from rural and urban development cooperation in Africa, Asia and Latin America*. Kurzinfo 425 Nr. 21, GTZ, Eschborn, Bonn, Germany. See also this issue.

Guijt, I. 1995. *Moving Slowly and Reaching Far. Institutionalising participatory planning for child-centred development. An interim analysis.* IIED/Redd Barna, Uganda.

Kar, K. and Backhaus, C. 1994. *Old Wine in New Bottles? Experiences with the application of PRA and participatory approaches in a large-scale, foreign-funded Government development programme in Sri Lanka.* Typescript, draft, 13 June 1994 (available from PRA, IDS, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK)

Phuyan, B. 1992 *Participatory Rural Appraisal: Utilization Survey Report Part 1.* Rural Development Area Sindhupalchowk, Nepal, ActionAid, Nepal, P.O.Box 3198, Kathmandu, July (available from PRA, IDS).

Samaranayake, M. 1994. Institutionalizing participatory approaches. Paper presented at the *Dare to Share Fair*, GTZ, Eschborn, Germany, September 20-21, 1994.

Thompson, J. 1995 (forthcoming). Participatory approaches in government bureaucracies: facilitating the process of institutional change. *World Development* 23 (9).

5

_____

12

Only playing with beans? Participatory approaches in large-scale government programmes

Christoph Backhaus and Rukman Wagachchi

• Introduction

Participation has been on the agenda of rural development for many years. However, in mainstream government rural development programmes and projects this has in the past often been either mere lip-service or it has only meant that villagers were asked to contribute to the implementation of projects with their own resources. It has seldom resulted in the active involvement of beneficiaries in decision-making about their own development process.

The success of participatory approaches have to date mainly been reported in the context of non-government projects. More recently, in an attempt to benefit from these successes, many aid donors, project appraisers and project implementers have increasingly included the use of participatory approaches such as PRA as a must in their project designs for large-scale government development programmes. The general notion (assumption) is that what has been good for NGO projects must also be good for government programmes.

There is, however, little significant (and documented) experience available which describes the transfer of participatory approaches to hierarchical organisations and to large-scale projects. The change required is often thought merely to be the adoption of some new methods. The paradigmatic changes involved are hardly understood and their implications not accepted (Gilmour and Fisher, 1991; Chambers, 1993). A hope prevails (perhaps unconsciously) that the change of attitudes and behaviour will automatically follow when new methods are adopted.

Considering the high expectations on the one hand and the speed of this transfer on the other, there is a high risk that donors and implementing agencies alike will sooner or later conclude that bottom-up approaches do not work and the idea might be abandoned again before it has ever had a fair chance to prove itself.

In this article we describe the experiences of Sri Lanka's North Western Province Dry Zone Participatory Development Project (DZP) in transferring participatory approaches from one institutional culture to another.

• Sri Lanka's North Western Province Dry Zone Participatory Development Project (DZP)

The DZP is fairly typical of a large-scale, foreign-funded investment programme where project appraisers, on behalf of donor agencies, have prescribed the use of participatory approaches (PRA and PTD) in a mainly government-dominated set-up.

The project is implemented through provincial government agencies, and is coordinated by the Regional Development Division of the Ministry of Finance and Planning.[1] The aim of the DZP is to facilitate a participatory planning process in 500 villages (located in 13 administrative divisions) over a seven-year period. Through this process, the aim is to establish Village Resource Management Plans for each of these villages. The government services can use these plans to assist resource-poor farmers by providing technical advice and funding for the resource management activities selected by them. The project assistance, however, is limited to a list of pre-

1

defined project components such as the development of water resources for irrigation purposes (micro tanks and agrowells), upland farming systems development, goat rearing, land regularisation and credit.

One and a half years after project inception, participatory planning processes have occurred in about 40 villages. In summary, the following experiences were recorded.

- Instead of mobilising self-help and increasing self-reliance, the PRA exercises have sometimes encouraged high expectations of villagers for project assistance. The first village resource management plans often looked more like shopping lists than mutually agreed village development plans. This might partly be because Sri Lankan government services and projects are commonly related to subsidies and welfare programmes. In addition, every village knows that the project is an investment programme which is supposed to spend large sums of money.

- Even where a genuine participatory planning process has taken place and the results are considered by both sides as mutually binding agreements, the respective officers often encounter great difficulties in sticking to their promises. As the administration does not consider the commitment given to villagers as a priority, it may not provide them with the time and the resources to fulfil their obligations. Thus the momentum gained might be lost when villagers find out that the government side does not stick to the agreements made.

- Although people accept participatory concepts and behaviour during training courses, once they are re-integrated into their old social and hierarchical system, many resort almost entirely to their previous styles and behaviour.

- Although many field officers incorporate PRA methods into their overall approach quite easily, this does not automatically lead to a fundamental change in their attitudes and behaviour or in a better rapport with beneficiaries. Many of them

are involved in several projects, each promoting their own approaches and methods. They have to wear the 'participatory hat' on one day in one village and the 'instructor hat' on the next day in another one. A good indication of this confusion is that officers can often be heard saying *"today we go to village XY and do 'a PRA' "*.

- Some officers are tempted to make up results of 'participatory planning exercises' as they may earlier have cooked up data and/or results of conventional questionnaire-type surveys. Even if such practices are easy to detect, the damage is already done, since the trust of villagers for whom a 'participatory village plan' has been prepared is lost.

It would be easy to blame the attitudes and behaviour of individual officers for the difficulties encountered. However, among the eight independently operating teams (one per administrative division) responsible for facilitating village planning processes in the DZP, each one has so far encountered most of the difficulties listed above and has thus not lived up to the expectations. This points to more fundamental reasons for the short-comings.

- **The institutional culture of GOs**

In order to understand the main constraints better, the principal differences between the institutional culture of NGOs and GOs have to be taken into account when attempting to transfer a new concept from one institutional environment to another. The objectives of these institutions, their institutional cultures and identities, as well as the forces driving them are entirely different.

Instead of theoretically analysing the differences between the institutional cultures in detail and then academically concluding on the implications for transferring a new paradigm from one to the other, we propose to apply some of the key philosophical principles behind PRA to the transfer of participatory concepts to government organisations. One of the philosophical pillars of PRA is the importance of understanding and accepting

2

people (and organisations) in their own situation and environment. Change should be induced by going through a participatory process of discovery jointly and learning from each other. Promoters of PRA unanimously agree to apply this view to rural people and project beneficiaries, but seldom to government officials working with rural communities.

To apply a PRA attitude not only to project beneficiaries but to all people and organisations involved would have a number of implications for the planning and implementation of large-scale 'participatory' government projects. We describe these in turn below.

Implications for project planning

A government agency cannot be expected to implement a participatory project successfully and instantly. The initial focus should be on the development of human resources, which applies to government staff as well as beneficiaries. In the beginning, expectations for rapid achievement of physical targets and impact should be very low, otherwise there is the risk that some people will later use the project as proof that *"participation does not work"*.

An orientation or transition phase (which might require two to three years) is needed to enable staff to learn and to adjust, and for strategies to be developed and tested (Box 1).

A blue-print approach should be avoided in favour of a process-oriented strategy. Although this is commonly claimed, it is seldom really practised because donors and project appraisers do not really believe that the people responsible for implementation will be able to develop and adjust their won strategies and instruments. Instead, they are generally expected to copy some methods and apply them mechanically.

The adoption of a participatory working style in a hierarchical organisation has to be a continuous, step-by-step process. It requires experienced and qualified people as facilitators of a process of discovery and learning. Formal staff training, although important, is not sufficient. Continuous backstopping and

coaching are more suitable. For this process, the usual short-term inputs of consultants and trainers are of limited usefulness. What is required are persistent 'change agents' coming from outside the organisation who are available over a longer period of time.

BOX 1
HOW THE NATURE OF ASSISTANCE AFFECTS PARTICIPATION

In grant-based Technical Assistance (TA) projects the orientation-phase is already quite common. However, loan-based Financial Assistance (FA) projects do not normally include an orientation-phase because they fear a negative effect on a project's cost-benefit ratio. If donors and planners responsible for FA projects cannot overcome these constraints, the solution might be to fund the initial two or three year phase of a project, when people and strategies are being developed, through TA. If a sound set-up for beneficiary participation is in place, the funding can be continued with Financial Assistance. Such a symbiosis would provide both TA projects with greater leverage and FA with the local, process-oriented project preparation they need but are not able to finance (Rauch *et al.,* 1993).

Implications for project implementation

Presently PRA practitioners or the promoters of other participatory approaches (most of them coming from an NGO-background) often consider the typical attitudes and behaviour of government officers as 'wrong', and blame them for being too slow and unable to change. This view might be justifiable from the perspective of rural people and project beneficiaries. However, it shows a lack of willingness to understand and accept people in their situation and it excludes the development of a joint learning process.

An insistence on a 'proper' approach to PRA makes it difficult for people to gradually absorb the new ideas and to develop their own concepts. For example, visualisation methods are a key element of PRA, but they have to be adjusted to the specific situation. In Sri Lanka, especially in the DZP project area, villagers are almost 100% literate. That is why they sometimes referred to PRA exercises conducted in their villages as *"playing with*

3

beans". They did not understand why they were asked to use such 'primitive' means, despite being able to work with pen and paper. There are many valid reasons for working with seeds or stones and in the sand instead on paper. The danger is, however, that due to such remarks, some project officers jumped to the conclusion that sharing by visualisation does not work in Sri Lankan villages and wanted to return to the more familiar methods of extracting information in interviews and putting it down in their notebooks.

As the first signs of success begin to show, credit for this should be given to those who may have been sceptical, but who nevertheless have attempted new strategies.

• **Conclusions**

The issues raised here should by no means deter anybody from increasing people's participation in rural development projects. We wanted to point out, however, why it would be unfair to see participatory approaches as the panacea for all problems and deficiencies of past and present rural development projects. The changes required to realise true participation in large-scale government development projects are so fundamental that due time and resources must be provided in order to give the approach a fair chance to survive its present stage as the 'newest flavour' in project design.

• **Christoph Backhaus** and **Rukman Wagachchi,** North Western Province Dry Zone Participatory Development Project, New Secretariat Building, Dambulla Road, Kurunegala, Sri Lanka.

NOTES

REFERENCES

Chambers, R. 1993. *Challenging the Professions: Frontiers for Rural Development*. Intermediate Technology Publications, London.

Gilmour, D.A. and Fisher, R.J. 1991. *Villagers, Forests and Foresters. The philosophy, process and practice of community forestry in Nepal.* Sahayogi Press, Tripureshwar, Kathmandu.

Rauch. T. et al. 1993. *Regional Rural Development. RRD Update. Elements of a Strategy for Implementing the RRD Concept in a Changed Operational Context.* BMZ/GTZ, Eschborn.

4

13

Participatory approaches in Save the Children Fund, UK

Louisa Gosling

• Save the Children Fund in a changing world

Save the Children Fund (SCF) is a large, complex organisation operating in a messy and complicated world. In its 75 years of existence, the development work of SCF and the nature of the organisation itself have evolved and expanded in response to a changing environment. The aim of this piece is to stimulate discussion about the role, strengths and weaknesses of participatory approaches, and particularly Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in the context of SCF, UK. Any comments would be welcome.

- The environment in which SCF operates has changed in several ways:

- The number of programmes and geographical spread has increased and with it the number of staff and level of bureaucracy at headquarters, regional and country level;

- The approach towards development work has changed, focusing more on developing local capacity and on building local ownership, and away from service provision or programmes based on top-down decisions;

- Official donors are channelling more overseas aid money through Northern and Southern NGOs, making NGOs more clearly accountable to donors and increasing the influence of donors on NGO policy and practice;

- SCF is making more use of its experience in advocacy work to influence donors, other NGOs, governments and other decision-makers; and,

- Countries and governments with whom we work are becoming poorer, and are decentralising control for many essential services like health, education and social welfare. Many southern NGOs are springing up which affects SCF's relationships with its partners, and its role in working with government.

When SCF, UK was smaller it was possible to rely on informal ways of learning from experience and developing policy and practice. In a bigger organisation the informal methods of communication and decision making have to be supplemented by formal systems.

Some things, however, remain the same, two of which are particularly relevant to the use of PRA in SCF. Firstly, SCF has a long-term commitment and involvement in its country programmes. Secondly the power relations within and between NGOs, donors, partners, governments and local people have been and will continue to be complex, unequal, and inevitably to some extent, non-transparent.

In the present environment it is essential that SCF is as analytic, systematic and participatory as reasonably possible in planning and managing its work. This is the only way in which it can build on its long, diverse and perpetually changing experience in order to improve its effectiveness, respond to change, and continue

1

to be innovative. And it is the only way it can communicate effectively with the many different stakeholders in the whole rich tapestry of its environment, from the World Bank to refugee children.

To this end SCF has introduced a strategic planning process, and an overall approach towards assessing, monitoring, and evaluating its work. The underlying principles are that assessment, monitoring, review and evaluation should be *participatory* (all the relevant people should be involved); they should *recognise differences and avoid discrimination;* and they should be carried out in a *systematic* way to ensure a balanced view of the situation. Beyond these underlying principles, the techniques and approaches used should be selected according to the particular situation. To support this approach the *"Assessment, monitoring, review and evaluation Toolkits"* have been produced. They present the principles and practical issues involved in the processes, and describe a number of tools - techniques and approaches- which may be useful at different stages of the processes. PRA is one such approach.

• SCF's use of PRA

The issue for SCF in using PRA is how it can be used effectively, recognising its weaknesses and limitations as discussed in this issue of *PLA Notes*, and within the very real constrictions of our work. The discussion around PRA often concentrates on the conditions necessary for a 'pure PRA'. In other words, when the purpose is to empower communities to plan, implement and manage their own development. This is undoubtedly a very desirable goal, but as an organisation we are not at the stage when we can honestly say this is possible in all cases, nor is it always appropriate. The bureaucracy, power relations, historical developments and organisational factors described above all mean that SCF is unlikely to be involved purely as a facilitator in a community development process.

How, then, can PRA be of most use to an organisation like SCF? There are several specific areas in which it has proven useful, as the following case studies illustrate.

PRA for research

Participatory methods have proved useful for gathering qualitative information in a systematic way (Box 1). This has helped SCF staff and partners understand the needs and perceptions of people who will be affected by development activities, and to respond to those needs. The information gathered can be used for purposes of accountability (within SCF, to beneficiaries and donors) through assessment, monitoring, review and evaluation; and can also be used for research and advocacy.

BOX 1
PRA AND THE FOOD ECONOMY IN SOUTHERN SUDAN

SCF is involved in training World Food Programme monitors in South Sudan to carry out research into the food economy and what it means at the household level. Information is collected using different methods and then analysed following a framework which has been developed as part of the SCF research into vulnerability mapping, and the *'food economy approach'*. The information is converted into figures to provide quantitative data about the amounts of food available compared with what is required. Different methods are used to collect the information, including seasonal calendars, community mapping, pairwise ranking, and key-informant interviews. The views of different people are cross-checked to see which food sources are most important at different times of year, and to check for internal consistency in the *'food economy'* model. The community maps are made first with as many people as possible to help orient researchers when they first arrive in a village. Seasonal calendars are drawn with men and women separately. Children are also interviewed.

PRA for training and awareness

Participatory training can be more effective than conventional workshops and seminars in changing people's behaviour and attitudes and transferring new skills. PRA training and field experiences can be used to build the capacity of development workers to involve, listen to, communicate with and interpret the views of community members, and to facilitate their direct representations. This also encourages awareness of the realities of life for people in

the South (Box 2). This is a vital first step in gradually changing attitudes within SCF and creating an organisational culture which is more participatory.

BOX 2
PRA AND TRAINING

A PRA field workshop was held in Jijiga, Ethiopia, for staff about to be involved in community rehabilitation, having previously worked only in refugee camps weighing and measuring children. The workshop was designed to promote the skills needed to identify community needs and facilitate community development. Different participatory methods were introduced in the workshop, but the most widely adopted new skill has been semi-structured interviewing. Participants have learnt how to ask probing questions, and how to cross-check information with different key informants. Role play in the workshop was useful in improving interviewing techniques, and practical exercises were used to explore different aspects of communication, for example, the importance of body language. The workshop and field exercise were found to be useful in learning new skills and approaches, but it was recognised that a whole new way of working is needed to enable SCF to respond to needs identified by communities.

A PRA workshop is also planned in Iraq to help increase the capacity of urban-based staff to investigate community rehabilitation needs more effectively, and to improve the sustainability of the SCF inputs by ensuring greater local involvement in the planning and management process.

Participatory monitoring and evaluation

A more participatory approach to monitoring and evaluation can gradually increase the ability and confidence of staff and partners in programme management and development, especially in areas where staff have had limited education and experience in programme management. This approach can only work where the programme has been designed to respond to the lessons learnt through the monitoring and evaluation process (Box 3).

BOX 3
PRA FOR EVALUATION IN MALI

In Mali, participatory approaches were used by a team from SCF and Suivi Alimentaire du Delta Seno (SADS) to find out what women thought of a Grameen bank for a women's association[1]. They were questioned about the impact of the programme in terms of increased income; the capacity for self-management of the association; and the sustainability of the project and future inputs required. The women were divided into three groups - poor, medium, and rich - according to their own criteria for wealth ranking. Each group was questioned using semi-structured interviews and ranking exercises using stones to represent changes in capital, income, expenditure and the relative importance of different income generating activities. The recommendations for the future of the programme were based on a discussion of the different views of the different groups of women.

A shortcoming of the review was that there was not enough cross-checking of some of the findings which seemed to be contradictory. There was also no real attempt to find out how the project has affected children. The experience of the review has shown that participatory research is fun and engaging for both the reviewers and the beneficiaries. The Maliens are comfortable using local materials to draw pictures and to represent quantities. The partner agency was very interested to learn about the approach, and it was good for all the staff to see how much villagers know when given appropriate tools to express themselves.

PRA to focus on children's needs

Participatory methods may play a useful role in turning SCF into a more child-focused agency, by explicitly involving children in any programme assessment, monitoring or evaluation. They may also help to develop the capacity of staff to communicate with children in order to involve them and to help them to represent their own views.

---

[1] The Grameen Bank provides affordable credit via groups of women at village level. For further information about this project see Rapport de l'evaluation sur la banque "Grameen" de l'association des femmes d'Attara. Cercle de Youvarou, Republique du Mali, 1994.

For example in Kratie province, Cambodia, a PRA needs assessment has been carried out by a local consultancy firm to find out about the needs of children in the area. The aim of the research was to ensure that children's views and needs should provide a focus for any SCF activities in the province.

- ## Future of participatory approaches in SCF

These experiences with PRA and other participatory approaches will gradually feed back into SCF. There is growing recognition throughout the organisation of the importance of systematic information collection and analysis generally, and the value of participatory approaches in particular. The awareness and skills of a growing number of individual members of staff will gradually increase SCF's capacity to use the approaches properly in the context of its work. We also need to analyse experience within SCF and other organisations more formally, in order to explore how PRA can best be used for the purposes suggested here, capitalising on its strengths and avoiding its weaknesses.

PRA also has potential for helping develop partnerships between SCF, communities, government and other partners over a long period, and to bridge gaps between government and communities, and different levels of governments with whom we work. To create a relationship between partners in which different perceptions, priorities and political realities can be explored in a systematic way, mutually acknowledged and built upon in developing programmes.

A *Children's Agenda* has been drawn up by SCF to show why and how children should be placed at the centre of all social development activities. Children's participation is one of the recommendations for practical programming, and a wide range of approaches need to be developed to help involve children of different ages, cultures, and situations in different stages of programme planning, implementation and evaluation[2].[3] The capacity of development workers to involve, communicate and interpret children's views also needs to be systematically strengthened. Participatory approaches may be one way to help do this.

- **Louisa Gosling**, Overseas Information and Research, Save the Children Fund, 17 Grove Lane, London SE5 8RD, UK.

---

[2] The next issue of PLA Notes will be a semi-focus issue on the use of participatory approaches with and for children.

14

Development of PRA in Francophone Africa: lessons from the Sahel

Bara Gueye

• Introduction

The Sahel region has offered a fertile bed for the operational application of PRA through *"Gestion de Terroirs"* approaches that are being pursued in many countries. Since 1989 the experience with PRA in francophone West Africa has grown enormously and there is now a French language newsletter on PRA, *Relais MARP*, the third issue of which is now being produced[1].

IIED's PRA-Sahel Programme has established networks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal[2]. The networks focus much of their efforts on providing PRA training. In particular their aims are to:

- Strengthen the capacity of relevant institutions to conduct participatory planning, follow-up and evaluation of development programmes at the grassroots level;

- Identify obstacles to PRA development in the region; and,

- Maintain standards in the use of the methods.

This article analyses the problems encountered by the networks in trying to achieve these aims, and then suggests some possible ways forward.

• The challenges

In June 1994, a workshop was held in Saly Portudal, Senegal, to discuss issues relating to the rapid development of PRA in the region.

Most of the participants work in NGOs and are also members of the national PRA networks. They have been using PRA at the early stages of their project cycles or as an evaluation tool. One Senegalese NGO, Associates in Research and Development (ARED), has been working with IIED to design training for community members themselves (Box 1).

Internal challenges

The difficulties encountered by the networks were identified by participants at the workshop. Some have faced internal challenges, including:

- Inadequate training capacity. The few trainers available are struggling to meet the ever increasing demand for training. Consequently poorly-trained instructors provide training, thus spreading their limited knowledge and skills amongst NGOs and development projects. This has sometimes led to misinterpretations and poorly applied PRA principles in the field.

---

[1] *Relais MARP* is produced by and available from the Drylands programme, IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, UK.

[2] The four national network coordinators are: *Mathieu Ouedraogo*: PAF, BP 200 Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, Tel: (+226) 550 268. Fax: (+226) 550 007; *Idrissa Maiga*: GRAD, BP 5075, Bamako, Mali, Tel: (+223) 222 359. Fax: (+223) 228 873; *Malamine Savane*: CONGAD, BP 4109 Dakar, Senegal, Tel: (+221) 244 116. Fax: (+221) 244 413; and I*di Ango Oumarou*: Agri-Service Plus, BP 10557, Niamey, Niger, Tel: (+227) 734 947. Fax: (227) 734 347.

-up
and evaluation of programmes which fall
under the responsibility of networks.

External threats

However, there are also external threats to the
development of PRA within the region, such
as:

- PRA is too fashionable within the NGO
  community, creating great external
  pressure to adopt this approach quickly;

- The formal approach to PRA of many
  development professionals prevents the
  creativity and flexibility that was the
  trademark of early PRA-based work;

- Routinised practice has pushed the use of
  PRA away from its initial objectives and
  places local populations outside the
  decision-making processes; and,

- There is a tendency to view PRA as a
  panacea and, thus, to use it any old way,
  because of the wrong assumption that it
  will work well automatically.

- **Some ways forward**

PRA training for grassroots communities is
one of the most important objectives of the
PRA-SAHEL Programme. The networks want
to make PRA more suited to the needs of these
communities. They are, therefore, increasingly
emphasising the strengthening of local
people's capacities for analysis, understanding
and intervention.

To achieve this, the networks produce teaching
aids, establish follow-up and evaluation

mechanisms, retrain trainers, and adapt materials to local contexts and objectives.

Translating concepts into local languages is essential (Box 1) and the networks recommend that such initiatives are done by local people. This can avoid semantic confusions that could crop up during communications between development technicians and the populations.

Network monitoring and support is an important aspect of dissemination and collaboration between networks helps to promote interaction and complementarity between the various activities (see below). To maintain the quality of training programmes, the networks are developing indicators for evaluation, and are trying hard to find ways of working with less assistance from IIED.

Improving organisational culture

At the level of networks, PRA depends upon an organisational culture that promotes participation. Without this, no approach can produce positive results, whatever operational procedures and techniques are used. For this reason, it is essential for the networks to facilitate the institutionalisation of PRA amongst relevant organisations. For such a process to succeed there must be:

- A conscious and critical adoption of the principles and spirit of PRA as a working plan;

- A move away from the *ad hoc* or opportunistic use of PRA, towards promoting a committed involvement of grassroots communities in a long-term participatory planning process;

- An awareness that a participatory methodology is not a fixed concept and that its application and tools evolve with time and under prevailing circumstances. This entails open-mindedness and innovative and creative capacities;

- An understanding that PRA is essentially a qualitative process and not a quantitative concept;

- Staff training which ensures a better understanding not only of the practical PRA process but also of its methodological roots;

- The development of an organisational structure that promotes the philosophy of participation;

- An awareness that objectives will not be achieved quickly. Hence donors, in particular, must not only reconsider the time period set for projects and programmes expected to promote participation but they must also adapt their financial and management procedures to the requirements of participatory processes; and

- A commitment to 'community self-development' not merely as a political objective but as a realistic goal. Making available the means of achieving this (by decentralising resources, providing training and strengthening the institutional capacity of community structures) will be key.

Monitoring is particularly critical in the context of the Sahel because of the rapid pace of adoption of PRA. That is why quality assurance has become the utmost priority for all organisations who are adopting PRA in their work. Here are some of the action points that the networks have identified as important:

1. The design of any training programme should explicitly take into account the issue of follow-up and evaluation. Not only should the issue be addressed, but the development of methods and procedures for monitoring and evaluation of the training impact should be part of any PRA training programme;

2. Organisations engaged in training should have a clear idea of the output that is expected from their training. Moreover they should identify clear, context-specific indicators for measuring changes brought about by the use of PRA;

3. There should be mechanisms to allow an efficient exchange of experience among the different networks and to make 'good practices' known. Networks should also

set up frameworks for follow-up and evaluation of the development of PRA;

4. Seek ways to encourage and strengthen linkages among different regional networks; and,

5. Focus more efforts on improving information generation and dissemination.

- **Bara Gueye,** International Institute for Environment and Development, 3, Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, UK.

15

The respective merits of RRA and conventional methods for longer-term research

Kathrin Schreckenberg

• Introduction

In 1992/93 I spent a year in Benin, West Africa, conducting fieldwork for my PhD thesis *Forests, Fields and Markets: A Study of Indigenous Tree Products in the Woody Savannas of the Bassila Region, Benin*[1]. This article discusses experiences gained during this fieldwork. A variety of methods were used to investigate the availability and use of indigenous non-timber tree products. These included conventional research methods such as ecological transects to measure tree density, fortnightly phenological observations of marked trees to examine seasonal availability of products, measurement of yields and regular market surveys. In addition various RRA methods were employed ranging from matrices to calendars, maps and transects. This particular combination of methods gave rise to a number of reflections on their respective advantages and disadvantages, summarised in Table 1.

• The lone researcher

As a PhD student I found myself planning and carrying out most of my research on my own with only the help of an interpreter or a field assistant. However, for a small part of the research (a study on women's incomes and expenditure) I was fortunate enough to work in a team with Eva Sodeik (an anthropologist)

and Mouftaou Fagbemy (a rural sociologist)[2]. Working with them greatly helped the use of RRA methods. Using such methods alone proved much less productive, as it is nearly impossible to facilitate the methods, keep note of the process and discussion, and still ask probing questions. This is particularly true when the research is carried out with large groups of farmers. It was only when working with individual informants that I felt able to use the RRA methods successfully on my own. However, even then I would have preferred to have one or two more researchers (from different disciplines) to help in the interpretation of the results.

In contrast, the conventional research methods employed were relatively easy to carry out alone or with a local field assistant. These methods all rely on repeating the same, rigorously defined, observations over space (ie. the ecological transects and yield measurements) or over time (ie. the phenological study and the market survey). This repetition made it possible to train an assistant to help with the work or indeed, for them to carry it out on their own.

---

[2] They were both involved in the joint German/Beninois pilot project *The Restoration of Forest Resources in the Bassila Region*.

Table 1.	RRA methods versus conventional methods: some differentiating factors	
SOME DIFFERENTIATING FACTORS	*RRA methods(maps, transect walks, matrices,calendars)*	*Conventional methods (transects, phenology observations, yield measurements, market survey)*
Carried out by whom?	*Research team*	*Lone researcher*
Is experience of methods required?	*Preferably*	*Not necessarily (often fairly standardised)*
Is experience of area necessary?	*Definitely*	*Very little*
Whose time is taken up?	*Local people's*	*Researcher's*
Are expectations raised? Are underlying conflicts exposed?	*Yes*	*Not to same extent*

• **Experience of the methods**

All the methods used during the fieldwork were completely new to me. Despite my inexperience, I found the application of the conventional research methods to be fairly straightforward. They are well documented, often quite standardised and, once adapted to the local conditions, can be applied in a very routine manner. The main hurdle to overcome was having enough confidence in my own ability to do the work. RRA methods, however, not only require a researcher to have confidence in herself, but more importantly, to have confidence in the ability of local people to analyse and discuss. For a conventionally trained scientist used to being in control of research situations, this was the most difficult aspect of those methods.

Conventional methods needed some fine-tuning in the first few weeks, but further experience in their use made little apparent difference to the quality of the data collected. However, the opposite was true for the RRA methods, the use of which improved enormously with increasing experience. By the end of the fieldwork period it was possible to apply a far greater variety of RRA methods in a much more effective manner than when I started. With subsequent exposure to RRA methods, I now feel that it would have been possible to use them much more widely, even to the point of replacing some of the conventional methods. In particular the introduction of various historical RRA methods, such as maps of collection sites and

matrices of preferred species then and now, would have provided important information to complement the rather static nature of the data collected through conventional methods.

• **Experience of the area**

I had never visited the study area before fieldwork began. Contrary to my expectations, this did not complicate the application of most of the conventional research methods. A few weeks of exploring the local vegetation and getting to know the markets were enough to adapt both the ecological and market survey methods to the local conditions. In contrast, although the RRA methods require little adaptation to a specific location, their success depends on the facilitator having an intimate knowledge of the area in which they are being used. Without an understanding of both the physical and human environment it is not possible to interpret fully the resulting discussion or to ask the necessary probing questions.

This became very clear in the joint research I undertook on women's incomes and expenditure. Our team of three people carried out the same research with five groups of women from different ethnic groups, more or less one after the other, over a period of nine months. At the start of the study two members of the team had only been in the area for one and two months respectively. The information collected later is much more complete and reliable than the information obtained from the first group of women. In the early stages we

_____

accepted too much information at face value, only to find later that it was contradicted by information from other sources. At a later stage, with a deeper understanding of the area, we were better able to recognise evasive statements or conflicting information, and could try to resolve these issues through more probing questions or the use of other complementary RRA methods.

• Research time

All the conventional research methods were very labour-intensive for the researchers, but rarely used up much of local people's time. Even interviews could be kept quite short or carried out while the respondents engaged in other work. In comparison, the RRA methods produced more results for a given unit of my time, but required a much heavier time investment from the participating villagers. While it was always left to local people to choose their most convenient time, the RRA-based discussions nevertheless took them away from their other tasks for up to two or even three hours.

• Raising expectations and exposing conflicts

The presence of an outside researcher is always likely to raise questions and expectations in the minds of local people. However, in both the ecological and market survey methods direct contact with local people was minimal and usually restricted to one or two individuals at a time. After initial curiosity people grew accustomed to seeing me carry out the same routine tasks week after week and appeared to accept my explanations that this research would have no direct benefits for them.

The use of RRA methods turned out quite different in this respect. Asking people to come together in a group to discuss certain issues causes excitement and inevitably raises their hopes that they may benefit in some way from the exercise. It was very hard to convince them that this was 'just' research, particularly for the work which was carried out with the two colleagues from the forestry project. This was in spite of the fact that we used the

methods very explicitly to extract data, and not to encourage local analysis and action.

Expectations were not the only things to be raised during the RRA work. A number of underlying conflicts were exposed in a way that probably would not have occurred with the conventional methods. During the ecological and market surveys any conversations held were usually with individuals rather than groups. The people concerned sometimes did discuss issues of conflict with me. They had enough trust that my interpreters and I would not break their confidence and there were no witnesses to challenge or hold them to their statements at a later date. However, once disagreements surfaced in the group RRA context it was impossible to sweep them under the carpet (Box 1).

> **BOX 1**
> **A BOUNDARY DISPUTE**
>
> A particular instance of group conflict occurred during the drawing of a village map, originally intended to show the location of the main natural resources used by the villagers. The villagers concerned belonged to the indigenous ethnic group and decided that only the traditional landowners, of whom there are about a dozen, could reliably draw the map. A second meeting was convened with all the landowners (or their representatives) and each started to draw his or her share of the village territory. Though not requested by either myself or my two co-facilitators, they also drew the internal boundaries between different landowners' territories on the map. This was the first time any of these boundaries had ever been drawn or even discussed in public, and inevitably there are disputed areas. At one point it was only the village chief's timely intervention which prevented two elderly and respected men from coming to blows, an incident which left everybody feeling very uncomfortable and ashamed. In particular my colleagues and I felt unhappy about our role in initiating this totally unexpected dispute, which we were completely unprepared to deal with.

• Conclusions

In conclusion, conventional methods can offer a single researcher a straightforward approach to longer-term research. These can be adapted to local conditions fairly rapidly and do not

_____

3

require a detailed prior understanding of the research area in order to produce good quality data. However, RRA methods can produce interesting insights much more rapidly, thus saving the researcher valuable time. Although they are certainly more effective when carried out by a multi-disciplinary team, RRA methods can be applied successfully by a single researcher. This is particularly true if they are used with individual informants or very small groups, and if the researcher already has a good understanding of the study area and can cross-check information with that obtained from other research methods.

In my study I found the combination of the two types of methods to be very rewarding, with the RRA work supplying the contextual information for the quantitative data provided by the conventional research methods.

However, researchers need to consider carefully the context in which their research is being carried out. If their research is conceived as a prelude to some kind of action (whether project intervention or community mobilisation and organisation), more interactive participatory methods are very appropriate. However, if no action is planned, it might be better to rely largely on conventional research methods and use RRA methods only to complement these, being careful to avoid raising false hopes or exposing conflicts unnecessarily.

- **Kathrin Schreckenberg,** 51a Kempe Road, London NW6 6SN, UK

16

PRA: a new literacy?

Anna Robinson-Pant

- ### Introduction

PRA has evolved by "trying out practices, finding what works and what does not and then asking why" (Chambers, 1994). Occasionally PRA practitioners have also asked *"how appropriate is this particular method in this cultural and social context?"*. Gerard Gill, for example, points out in *RRA Notes* 18 that *"the concept of a pie or cake cut into wedge-shaped servings is quite alien"* to many people in rural areas of the developing world. Introducing Western visual materials raises questions about whether *"images are recognisable, evident and culturally acceptable to people living in non-literate cultures"* (Epskamp, 1984). The visual methods of PRA might also be seen as a new technology being introduced into a traditional context. Although local *materials* such as beans and rangoli powders are used to create maps or matrices, the *methods* seem to belong very much to a Western literate society.

In this article, I explore the idea of PRA as a *new literacy*, where ideas are represented visually through symbols. I focus on diagramming methods as specific skills which are being introduced to non-literate, and literate, villagers. I look not just at what this literacy consists of but at how it is being introduced.

- ### Two approaches to literacy

Many issues that have been the focus of critical reflection by PRA practitioners can be related to current discussions on literacy. The starting point that *"we may simply be imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practice onto other people's literacies"* (Street, 1993), is characteristic of recent work by anthropologists. Their detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice have generated concepts that can provide an interesting framework for analysing how PRA 'works' in different cultural settings: in particular, the distinction between *"autonomous"* and *"ideological"* models of literacy (Street, 1993).

The notion of the 'Great Divide' (Goody, 1968) suggests that it is literacy that distinguishes 'modern' from 'primitive' societies. This has come to be known as the *"autonomous"* model of literacy. Literacy, for Goody, is a *"neutral technology"* (Street, 1993) and is independent of the social, cultural and political contexts in which it is practised. In contrast, the *"ideological"* approach sees literacy as social practice, and literacy practices as aspects not only of 'culture' but of relations of power (Roberts and Street, 1995). Rather than a single universal literacy, this approach argues that a number of literacy practices may exist in a given society.

Does participation in PRA require a new literacy?

The ideological approach can help to analyse what kind of literacy is being introduced by PRA practitioners through activities such as seasonal calendars and mapping. This may explain not only why some methods work or do not work, but also why PRA does not always easily lead to planning and local action.

PRA is often described in terms of stages, where the discovery stage is followed by a stage of formulating action plans and implementing projects. Many development agencies find it hard to keep up the momentum generated by the initial phase. Some of the problem lies in implicit contradictions between

1

organisational and local agendas. However, part of the problem may be related to the kinds of literacy that are used in the planning and 'action' stage in which reading and writing skills become prominent.

Many PRA practitioners are aware of the implications of transferring maps made with beans and stones on the floor onto paper, when a different kind of literacy, ie. reading and writing, comes to dominate. But this process seems inevitable when plans are translated from verbal discussions at public fora into proposals for action that are channelled through agencies. Shah reports an experience where: *"An illiterate man made a map with no names or writing. He put the map on the wall for a presentation but then someone else added names; during the presentation the illiterate was isolated and the literates took over"* (1991).

The kinds of skills needed for visual literacy and numeracy also need to be looked at, if we are to ensure that certain groups are not excluded. Mosse (1993), for example, suggests that one possible explanation for women's sometimes limited participation in PRA activities may lie in a failure to take account of their own preferred ways of communicating, such as song or drama.

Researchers have similarly questioned to what extent illustrators draw on local visual images. Applying this idea to PRA, we can ask to what extent PRA both draws on local literacies or numeracies and introduces new concepts and skills.

The idea of PRA as a means to support empowerment processes links clearly to the 'ideological' model of literacy. By using the more visual literacy of diagrams, the dominant power of reading and writing in project planning can be reduced. If PRA aims to empower disadvantaged groups through this new kind of literacy, we need to look at whether (and if so, why) the PRA diagrams actually hold more meaning for some participants than the printed word.

- **PRA methods**

In this section I discuss three PRA methods to see whether PRA activities build on existing skills and practices or whether they require *new literacy* skills.

Mapping

It is widely accepted that people in both urban and rural areas carry mental maps. Transforming a mental map into a physical map seems remarkably straightforward, judging from the experience of PRA practitioners. Research on visual literacy has found that people only had problems interpreting pictures when three dimensions were represented in a two dimensional medium (Walker, 1979). Two dimensional symbolic representations such as cartoons and drawings were interpreted as easily as photographs. Fuglesang (1982) observes that people *"expect the pictures to contain what they **know** about the objects, not only what they **see** of the objects"*.

Similarly, with PRA mapping we can see that people are being encouraged to represent what they *know* rather than what they *see*. Social aspects such as caste, number of members in a household and gender, can be illustrated on the map as well as physical features. Mapping clearly uses the visual literacy skills that people already have. As there is no defined 'correct way' of mapping, participants can choose their own methods of representation.

Although mapping can be used to explore different perspectives and viewpoints in separate gender or age groups, it is often assumed that the facilitators (usually external to the community) interpret the map in the same way. How can we be sure that this is so? PRA facilitators are encouraged to see things from the villagers' point of view, rather than imposing their views. But to what extent are existing conventions or local literacies used to represent reality?

Matrix ranking

Shah suggests that *"every village has its local taxonomy and classifications: these are often more diverse than those used by outsiders"*

(1991). Ranking and scoring is used in PRA to understand people's preferences and choices, drawing on their own categories and classifications rather than imposing those of outsiders. To what extent, however, does the process of ranking represent an introduced practice? And how do people make the step from classification to visual ranking in PRA?

Rather than using numerical symbols, ranking in PRA is done with locally available materials, such as beans or stones. These are used to represent quantities according to local counting systems. In Mongolia, *Shagaa*, a bag of sheep and goats' knucklebones are used like dice or counters in games. Cullis reports in *RRA Notes* 20 how these bones were used with herders to rank livestock losses: *"the exercise was enhanced by the use of the bones, which to the herders already represented animals"*.

The form of the matrix, however, is introduced to structure the exercise, and this is usually a foreign notion. Rather than introducing what is essentially a Western 'game' of ranking variables on a matrix, using or adapting local games can draw on local cultural forms in a similar way to how literacy professionals adapt local literacy practices. Barker (1979) describes how the Yoruba game of *Ayo* was adapted as a research tool for farmers to compare different kinds of weeds.

Considering ranking as 'new numeracy practice', however, raises several questions. How far does the form of the matrix itself shape the information that is presented in a matrix? Goody (1977) suggests that the use of columns and rows presents information so that *"each item is allocated a single position, where it stands in a definite, permanent and unambiguous relationship to the others"*. Tables, he contends, *"may simplify reality for the observer but often at the expense of a real understanding of the actor's frame of reference"*. To what extent does the process of ranking resemble the complexity of real life decision making in different cultural settings? The idea of making choices between two variables, a process whereby *"we sort matters out analytically, relate them logically and test them systematically"* (Geertz, 1983) in itself represents a way of thinking that may be peculiarly Western. What, then, is ranking

introducing and to what extent is the resulting information and analysis of value?

Time lines and seasonal calendars

The idea of a time line or calendar could be seen as a Western innovation or a new literacy practice. Fuglesang describes how we tend to talk about time in English in terms of objects and events. We objectify time and *"even push our luck and talk about seven days just as we talk about seven stones in a row. This is extraordinary since seven stones can be clearly perceived, but seven days cannot be perceived"* (Fuglesang, 1982). He suggests that this contrasts with Swahili where the word *"future"* means *"later"*, *"afterwards"* or *"next"* (ie. not an object as such). As the *"seven stones for seven days"* suggests, the visual representation we choose is influenced by our language.

Research in Nepal found that non-literate people found it easy to represent a sequence pictorially and moved pictures into a line to represent a sequence of events (Walker, 1979). This suggests that the 'before' and 'after' distinction may be what is guiding PRA participants, rather than the divisions of the different months or seasons (the 'objectifying' of time). Shah (1991) stresses the importance of starting from people's own use of time: *"As the frame of reference for many villagers does not correspond to a calendar month, it is important to get these terms right at the beginning"*. And as with ranking, form can dictate the 'meaning' of the results. Chambers reports an instance where after a facilitator had worked with a woman to create a timeline, she turned the axes around and said *"It looks better, but your way is all right also"* (Chambers, pers. comm.).

The visual aspect of PRA is seen to be a bridge between the oral and written ways of communicating and a means of sharing the power usually limited to literate groups of people. Research into how people 'read' pictures has shown that we can all see, but do not necessarily understand or interpret pictures or diagrams in the same way. What is interesting for PRA practitioners is how quickly people can learn to interpret pictures once they have seen examples. These findings support the use of sequences within PRA. As

people become familiar and confident with representing ideas visually, one method can lead to another with relative ease. The visualised product acts as a focus and anchor for discussions (Cornwall, 1995). The practice of *"interviewing the diagram"* means that diagramming forms but one part of a social process, which is both verbal and visual. People's different interpretations of a diagram are also revealed through this 'interviewing' process and help counter the common assumptions that diagrams are value-free or without bias.

• PRA as a literacy practice

The use of visual representations in PRA is based on certain beliefs about people's understanding. As I have suggested, many of these assumptions are supported by research on visual literacy and numeracy. However, the way PRA activities are facilitated also determines their success. The term *literacy practices* refers not just to the skills of reading and writing but to the associated behaviour and contexts in which they are used. We can also look at PRA as a *literacy practice*, that is, less in terms of skills or techniques and more as a social process where two groups of people enter each other's perspective.

The PRA activity is shaped by the social context and the interaction of the facilitator and the participants in a particular situation. Research into people doing arithmetic concluded that they could perform more complicated calculations in a supermarket than in a school or laboratory, simply because they felt comfortable in the setting and were not objects as in an experiment. Any discussion of context brings in questions of motivation. The extent to which we feel that what we are doing is useful or has some purpose greatly affects how we perform. The role of the facilitator is key to the whole process of PRA, as much in building up confidence as in passing on specific skills. Educational research shows how teachers' expectations have contributed to black and lower class children under performing in UK schools. Similarly, whether or not the PRA facilitator expects 'illiterate farmers' to be able to rank variables on a grid, can affect participants' confidence and motivation.

The outcome of PRA activities thus depends not only on acquiring certain skills, the setting and the perceived purpose of the exercise, but also very strongly on the style of facilitation.

• Conclusion

PRA consists of much more than just using individual methods such as ranking or mapping. The sequence and combination of activities and methods is significant, as are practices like 'interviewing the diagram' and cross-checking and linking information between different groups and different methods. The facilitator's expectations and relationship with participants, the familiarity of the setting, and whether people feel they are in control of the process all play an important part too.

The PRA methods discussed above seem to hold meaning for the participants because they are still in context. People can choose the symbols and remember what they represent. But as the diagrams become more abstract, I wonder whether non-literate participants can still interpret them. Similarly, when the immediate context is taken away from the maps and matrices by transferring them onto paper, what conditions are needed for people to still make sense of them? Is it enough, for example, for people to do the transferring themselves?

As visual literacy is often taken for granted, we may fail to recognise that people see things differently or have varying visual literacy skills. When diagramming and mapping are introduced into a community, we also need to be aware of what ideology goes along with those skills. The *making* of diagrams perhaps needs to be seen as distinct from the interpreting stage, just as the skills of writing and reading receive separate emphasis in literacy courses. PRA practitioners are usually aware of how writing on diagrams or even using pens and paper may alienate certain groups. But perhaps they need to look more closely at what expectations they have of people's visual literacy skills and understanding. As with 'new' literacy users, we need to ensure that the visual activities of PRA are helping to extend people's visual literacy by building on the skills they already

4

have and making the most of the existing local visual literacy and numeracy systems.

- **Anna Robinson-Pant,** Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK.

REFERENCES

Barker, D. 1979. Appropriate methodology: an example using a traditional African board game to measure farmers' attitudes and environmental images. *IDS Bulletin* 10 (2). IDS, Brighton, UK.

Chambers, 1994. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): analysis of experience. *World Development* 22 (9).

Cornwall, A. 1995 (forthcoming). Towards participatory practice: PRA and the participatory process. In: de Koning, K. (ed.) *Participation and Health.* Zed Books, London.

Epskamp, K. 1984. Cross-cultural interpretations of cartoons and drawings. *Media Asia* 11 (4): 208-214.

Fuglesang, A. 1982. *About Understanding: Ideas and Observations on Cross-cultural Communication.* Dag Hammerskjold Foundation, Uppsala, Sweden.

Geertz, C. 1983. The way we think now: toward an ethnography of modern thought. *Local Knowledge: Further essays in interpretative anthropology.* Basic Books, New York.

Goody, J.G. 1968. *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Goody, J.G. 1977. The Domestication of the Savage Mind. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Mosse, D. 1993. Authority, gender and knowledge: theoretical reflections on the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal. *ODI Network Paper* 44. ODI, London.

Roberts, C. and Street, B.V. 1995 (forthcoming). Spoken and written language. In: Florian and Coulmas (eds.) *Handbook of Sociolinguistics.*

Shah, P. 1991. PRA in India: review and future directions. *RRA Notes* 13. IIED, London.

Street, B.V. 1993. *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy.*

Walker, D. 1979. *Understanding Pictures.* University of Massachusetts, USA.

5

17

Tips for trainers:
What is PRA? A participatory learning game

Rachel Hinton

This game is based on the 10 Myths of PRA written by Ian Scoones (see pages 17-20 in this issue of *PLA Notes*). Often trainees have a notion of what PRA is through reading, or through popular ideas portrayed in the literature. In this game participants are asked to read 10 statements about PRA, all of which are myths, and to decide whether they are true or false.

• **Objectives**

To break the ice and get people listening to each other.
To create a common understanding about what PRA is and is not.

• **Preparation**

Write each myth on a card. You will need as many sets of these cards as there are groups.
Each group will need some way of designating a 'true' zone and a 'false' zone. For example, people can draw circles on the ground, or use large sheets of paper.

• **Time**

Allow 30 minutes for the group discussions, and another 30 for the feedback session.

• **Procedure**

1. Divide participants into at least two (preferably four or five) groups of 3 to 6 people.

2. Give each group a set of cards. Ask them to discuss the statements, and then divide the cards into 'true' and 'false' piles. If appropriate, groups can compete with

each other or against the clock to complete this task.

3. When the groups have piles of 'true' and 'false' statements, ask one group to list which cards they have in their 'true' pile. For each card, ask if any other group has the same card in their 'false' pile. In each case where groups have different opinions about a statement, ask them to argue their case until all participants are convinced the statement in question is false.

4. Discuss each statement in turn until all the common mistakes made when conducting PRA have been discussed. During the game participants should develop an understanding of good PRA practice and will gradually realise that all 10 of their statements are myths.

• **Comments**

This exercise is most suited for groups which have some knowledge, however limited and theoretical, of PRA. Interestingly, the 'experts' in the group often place many myths in the 'true' category. During the course of the discussion they come to realise they can also learn from the newcomers.

Source: Rachel Hinton, pers. comm