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## Participatory RRA in Gujarat

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### • Introduction

Are not all RRAs participatory? Well, they are to the extent that it is the local people who are interviewed and it is their needs which the RRAers seek to investigate/address. But just how much can these local people be involved in actually conducting the appraisal work? This was one of the questions which we set out to answer last September/October in Gujarat.

The principal objective of the RRA exercise was to develop a framework for participatory

village-level planning for use by the Aga Khan Rural Support programme (India). I joined staff from AKRSP(I) and together we designed and conducted a participatory type of RRA in two villages in the coastal district of Gujarat - Lathodra and Kambalia. We did not follow exactly the same procedure in each village, but the general schedule was along the lines of that shown in Table 1. Each of the two six-person teams which conducted each week-long RRA was made up of AKRSP(I) staff and myself, and included specialists in agriculture, forestry, watershed management, monitoring and community and cooperation work.

**Table 1. General schedule of the RRA model**

Day	Activity
1	Visible presence Review secondary data with villagers Space: Map, Transect
2	Time: seasonal patterns Historical information Trends and changes
3	Analysis of information More focused checklist Further work in village on these checklist issues
4	Further work in village
5	Further work in village – if appropriate Analysis and pooling of information
6	Production of diagrams Small group meeting (SGM) with community leaders and some women of the village
7	Village planning session (VPS)

Lathodra and Kambalia were both relatively 'new' villages for AKRSP(I). Each had been visited by some members of their field staff to assess the potential for a specific project (in one case the construction of a checkdam, in the other the introduction of biogas plants) but little contact had been made yet with the villagers. The AKRSP(I) team therefore knew very little about the villages and the villagers knew relatively little about the work of AKRSP(I).

Before starting either of the RRAs we (the RRA team) paid an informal visit to each village. We consulted the Sarpanch (village headman) and asked his permission to conduct the RRA. We also met with leaders of each of the main communities in the village to explain the purpose of the RRA and to gauge the level of receptiveness towards our involvement in the village and towards the subsequent possibility of AKRSP(I) working there. While in each of the two villages we met with a favourable response to justify going ahead with the RRA, we were prepared to withdraw from a village if this was not the case.

We then discussed among ourselves the issues to be investigated, and drew up a preliminary checklist of ten issues:

- Availability of water
- Land use and ownership
- Status of animal husbandry
- Social group dynamics
- Formal village institutions
- Informal credit: systems
- Marketing
- Role of women in household economy
- Impact of the drought
- Past development projects.

Each of these issues was further broken down into sub-topics.

On the first day of the actual RRA, we stayed together as a team and spent some time visiting each of the different communities, to make it clear that we wanted to work with all social groups in the village, and were not biased towards an one group in particular. Indeed we spent a considerable proportion of our time during the first visits to the village simply wandering around and introducing

ourselves to the villagers, to make our presence known and to try and avoid any misunderstandings or suspicions about our intentions in the village.

Also on day 1 we tried to study the secondary data (village census records, map etc.) with some villagers to verify the figures and check for any changes which had occurred since the data were produced (encroachment of village grazing land, expansion of the housing area etc). We used the map for discussions to find out more information such as the ownership, productivity and problems of the different areas within the village.

We also used the map to help choose a representative transect line through the village - that is, a route along which we would pass through all the main zones within the village. We then walked this general route during the next several days, and noted down the characteristics and conditions of each zone. Again, the villagers were actively involved at this stage of information gathering. A group of two or three villagers joined us as we walked the transect. Their knowledge of the different zones was an essential supplement: to our own observations, and during interviews with other villagers encountered along the transect this group could also join in the discussions. Where possible we tried to work with this same small core group of villagers for several days; as they became familiar with the kinds of issues we were interested in we benefited more and more from their contributions and they were able to learn more about our approach. Indeed as the mystique of our work was removed this group of farmers in turn could tell other villagers of what was going on. As well as these benefits of participation by some of the villagers, we obtained an extra bonus in one of the villages, where one of the villagers accompanying us, a member of an untouchable caste, turned out to have a postgraduate training in sociology -a discipline which our team had been lacking!

Day 2 of the RRA focussed on the temporal information. We began to look for seasonal patterns, year-to-year trends and major changes, and consulted older members of the village for historical information. At this stage we split up into groups of two or three for the interviews, to cover a wider spread of topics,

in a shorter time, and to allow for more triangulation. In addition to the time-related 'questions, we tried to collect other types of information, depending on who we were interviewing, and we also left some time for continuing the work on the transect.

By this time, we had accumulated a considerable amount of information so the morning of day 3 was spent sharing this information within the team and identifying the topics which still needed to be investigated and the group of people who still needed to be met. We then drew up a more focussed checklist of these topics to be worked on during the next two days as our interviews became more focussed. I

By day 4 or 5 we withdrew from the village as we reached our 'optimal ignorance' level. In doing a participatory RRA, we found that this level was determined **not** only the amount of time we felt should be reserved for our own discussions on the information being gathered and the amount of detail and accuracy which we felt necessary, but also by the general feeling among the villagers. For instance, towards the end of his information gathering stage in Kambalia, we became aware of a degree of uneasiness during our interviews, when respondents were asked the same questions as they knew had already been asked to others, or when they were asked to provide more detail on questions they themselves had already answered. In this case, in order to avoid further antagonism, we decided to withdraw from the village rather earlier than we might otherwise have done i.e. we revised our idea of our 'optimal' level of ignorance. This cutting short of the village visit (by about half a day) did leave more gaps in our information, compared to the Lathodra RRA, but we felt this a worthwhile trade-off, weighed against the importance of maintaining a good rapport with the villagers.

An important next stage in the procedure was for the whole team to pool all the information to allow a comprehensive village report to be written, for the staff of AKRSP(I) to use in their future work with the village. It was also at this stage that we began to firm up our ideas as to the key problems and opportunities of the village and possible projects to help alleviate

the problems and/or make use of the opportunities.

We then drew a set of diagrams to illustrate our findings. In each of the RRAs, in addition to the map and transect these diagrams were mainly seasonal calendars showing the availability of the village's main resources, Problem periods were highlighted and opportunities were also marked. We then drew these diagrams on large sheets of card and tried to make them as understandable as possible, for the presentations, by minimising the amount of text and using colour-coding wherever possible. After trying out the diagrams in the first village we realised that the seasonal calendars could be simplified, by replacing the axis of individual months with 3 blocks of different colours, each representing a season. We were still not sure of how easy it would be to communicate our findings and ideas with these diagrams to the villagers, so as a first step we invited the leaders of each of the main communities to a small group meeting, outside the village. The actual identification of these people was quite straight-forward. We simply asked members of each community for the name of their respected leader, and then visited that person, to invite him to the meeting. We also made it clear that it was very important for some women to attend, and tried to find those women who would be most comfortable in speaking out at such a meeting. It proved difficult to convince the men of the value of this, and to convince the women that they had something to contribute, but in each of the two RRAs, the women who attended did speak up, especially when issues such as fuelwood were being discussed. As we presented each of the diagrams to the group, they helped us to amend any incorrect diagrams (for example, by showing on the map where areas marked as village grazing land were in fact government revenue land) and to fill in information on incomplete diagram (for example, adding an extra crop to the cropping calendar, or adding another problem to one part of the transect). The group could also tell us which diagrams they felt would be understood by most of the villagers. We also began at this stage to discuss with the group the issues represented in the diagrams and to get their ideas of the key problems in the village and any opportunities which they saw.

After this meeting with the leaders, we felt ready to go to the rest of the villagers with our findings. But in each case the leaders suggested it would be better if they themselves showed the diagrams to the other villagers. We welcomed these suggestions wholeheartedly, as they added greatly to the participatory nature of the RRA. So we accompanied the leaders to a general meeting in the village, to watch them present our findings. In Lathodra, the first village in which we tried this approach, we expected about 60 or 70 villagers to attend, but in the event 500 or 600 turned up! We had to abandon the idea of holding the meeting in the schoolroom, and convened instead on the open ground outside. The leaders stood up on a platform and held up and described each diagram in turn, and the issues being represented. The first diagram shown was the sketch map and the team watched as the elderly Brahmin who was presenting it hesitated each time he was showing a feature on the map. Then, realising the problem, he turned the map, upside down and continued more confidently with the presentation. Obviously the team's north-oriented map was how he envisaged his village!

The village meeting went on for some two hours. After sorting out the map, the Brahmin leader held up a transect diagram -a pictorial cross-section through the different areas of village land with notes on the conditions found there and special emphasis on the specific problems in each area. As he read out the notes, the other villagers began to shout out mistakes in the diagram: "You have left out an important problem in the grazing land; many people are mining the soil and that is why there is so little grass left". And in the housing area; none of those hand pumps are working now" Other leaders held up calendars showing when the water scarcity limits crop production, when it is that many of the villagers must buy fuel and fodder from outside the village, around when the landless labourers have to borrow money to see them through the slack period.

As well as enabling the team to correct their findings, each of the diagrams also provided a focus for discussion of the particular issue which it represented. Indeed they turned out to be a valuable means of ensuring that each key

issue was discussed. At one point the leader in charge of the presentations tried to show the fuel calendar very fleetingly and without commenting on it and was ready to move on to the next diagram which he obviously considered more interesting or important. But one of the villagers shouted out "Just a moment, Chief! It's clear that getting enough fuel is not a problem for you. In fact neither is it a problem for me. But it is a problem for many of the people in our village. So put up that diagram again, and let's talk about it!"

The fuel calendar was one of the diagrams which gave the women a chance to join in the discussions, as it dealt with a topic very relevant to their daily work. They were quick to point out mistakes. "That calendar shows that we collect wood from around the village; that's not true. There are virtually no trees left here to cut and we have to buy all our fuel from outside at that time."

After all the diagrams had been presented the discussion turned to ideas for dealing with some of the problems. A checkdam was the most popular option for many of the wealthier farmers with large landholdings near the river. But their wives argued that a bridge was more important. At present they have to wade across the river or make a long detour to the nearest crossing point, to bring food from their homes to their families working in the fields. We began to respond to the ideas which were being shouted out, sometimes throwing back questions for the villagers to consider: "That checkdam site will bring most benefit to farmers on an area of disputed land; that will cause problems for getting government approval for funding". We also began to tell the villagers about some of our own ideas such as biogas plants to help the fuel problem and an animal husbandry program to provide income for both the land-owning and landless members of the village. The discussions continued and the meeting finally ended with the villagers: deciding to form a Village Organisation to look into these various ideas with AKRSP(I).

A similar meeting was held in the second village, Kambalia, although as the Sarpanch insisted it was held during the day, fewer villagers attended. The smaller attendance made it easier to discuss each suggestion in

detail and four specific projects were identified as priority ones for AKRSP(I) to start work on. The disadvantage of the small attendance was that relatively few of the villagers heard or contributed to these decisions, and so the priority projects identified may not represent the priorities of the many absent villagers .

Overall from the experience of these two RRAs, I feel that there is much to be gained from a more participatory approach, but that it does require extra time and sensitivity. Time does need to be set aside at the beginning of the RRA to explain the work and seek the involvement of an interested group of villagers in helping the team during the early stages of information gathering. And sensitivity is essential if the expectations of the villagers are not to be raised inappropriately. I feel there is more danger of this in the case where villagers themselves are involved in the RRA, as they have invested their own time in the work, yet such a participatory approach does entail the team talking frankly with the villagers about the possible follow-up (and possible non follow-up) of the RRA. This openness should hopefully eliminate many of the misconceptions and suspicions and allow for a genuine two-way flow of information and ideas.

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