

6

Participatory approaches

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• From the Ground Up and participatory RRA in Kenya

From the Ground Up (FGU) is a collaborative effort of institutions in Africa and North America committed to improving natural resource management in Africa. The programme is administered and co-ordinated by the Center for International Development and Environment of World Resources Institute, in Washington, DC, USA, together with assistance from Clark University, Massachusetts, USA.

The objectives of FGU are threefold:

- to develop a better understanding of the core elements and key institutional, managerial, and technological relationships which contribute to successful natural resources management at the community level;
- to effectively disseminate the results, conclusions, and implications of the investigations 'across' to other communities and 'up' to the national policy apparatus and the development community; and,
- to assist communities to better identify long-term needs and opportunities toward enhancement and sustainable use of the local resource bases.

Over the past year, the National Environment Secretariat of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, Kenya, has been conducting a series of village-level exercises on effective natural resources management as part of this coordinated project. NES has employed Participatory Rapid Rural Appraisal

(PRRA) methods along with conventional household surveys to develop case studies of successful community efforts in resource management, and to prepare Village Resource Management Plans (VRMPS) - community-specific action plans for improved local management of critical natural resources.

NES has met with promising results in the five Kenyan communities in which PRRA methods have been used. The communities, with the assistance of government technical extension officers, have organised realistic VRMPs for developing, conserving and sustaining local natural resources, which they are now in the process of implementing.

The PRRA methodology proved especially useful in targeting particular priority areas, such as the rehabilitation of domestic water supplies and the improvement of horticultural crop production and marketing programmes, which required external, advice and assistance. NES has been able to enlist specialised agencies, including the Kenya Water for Health Organisation (KWAHO), and the Horticultural Crops Development Authority (HCDA) to work with the communities to develop viable strategies and implement appropriate activities to deal with these and other issues.

In June of this year, NES, Egerton University/Kenya, Clark University, and the Center jointly sponsored an intensive, month-long training programme in the PRRA/VRMP methodology. The 24 participants included senior Government officials, Government technical extension officers, representatives of Kenyan NGOs, as well as officials from FGU lead organisations in Somalia, Ghana, and Sierra Leone.

NES believes the PRRA/VRMP methodology has the potential to:

- provide a systematic, but semi-structured approach to enable a multisectoral team consisting of community leaders, extension officers, and NGO staff to examine community-based resource management concerns and carry out village appraisals;
- provide high quality information and clear pictures of community problems, opportunities, and capabilities in a relatively short amount of time, at a low cost, and without the need for foreign experts;
- establish locally developed and managed action plans to bring together, on one hand, development needs defined and ranked by community groups, and on the other, inputs and technical skills of development specialists with expertise in water, livestock agriculture, and forestry from government technical services, donor agencies, and NGOs;
- maximise local participation by gathering and analysing data in group discussions, using mostly visual instruments, and to facilitate community mobilisation, particularly of women, in activities that are truly sustainable;
- move beyond the conventional sectoral approach to project design, monitoring, and evaluation, and offer a holistic perspective on the factors that impinge on a community's progress; and,
- bridge the gap between intended beneficiaries and the professionals who manage development resources, and introduce natural resource management practices that village leaders and institutions have incentive to maintain.

However, a number of important issues have yet to be fully addressed. These include:

- the long-term application of the VRMPs (i.e. will the communities continue to refer to plans and update them periodically once the initial enthusiasm fades?);

- the effectiveness of VRMPS in high potential areas (i.e. all VRMPS prepared by NES have been in communities situated in different semi-arid, low-potential sub-locations in Kenya);
- the appropriate lead organisation to conduct PRRA/VRMP exercises (i.e. should the government be primarily responsible, or would it be more effective and efficient to leave such work to specialised NGOs with the institutional capacity and flexibility to orchestrate the appraisals?); and,
- the effectiveness of institutionalising the PRRA/VRMP methodology (i.e. what is the proper set of techniques to internalise the procedures into local organisations and to integrate them into the country's policies?).

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• **Diagrams for participatory RRA**

In an earlier article for RRA Notes (number 4) I described some participatory RRA work with the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India), (AKRSP(1)). The variety of diagrams which we used during this work certainly seemed to be valuable in encouraging us to involve some of the local people in the RRA. Here I will highlight some of the advantages of using such diagrams, and some of their limitations which I feel need to be overcome if the diagrams are to be widely applicable in participatory RRA work.

Advantages

- At an early stage of the RRA, updating an existing map of the village with a group of farmers meant we spent several hours together, discussing with them the purpose of our visit, the nature of the RRA as well

as the recent changes in land use in the village.

- After the field investigations, presenting our findings in the form of diagrams to a selected group of community leaders and women allowed us to further cross-check the information, correct any mistakes and discuss the issues represented in the diagrams.
- The leaders felt that the diagrams would help them to put across the main findings of our work, by highlighting the key issues which had emerged, and so the leaders themselves presented the diagrams at the village meeting scheduled at the end of the RRA.
- The diagrams presented at this meeting served the purposes of:
 - describing the village (through the map and transect) so discussions could begin on a common understanding of the resource base;
 - highlighting the key issues, and, by their very presence, forcing these issues to be addressed. One leader, presenting the fuelwood calendar only fleetingly, was told by a farmer to hold it up again so this important problem could be discussed;
 - showing community achievements and potential for improvements (for example a crop calendar of salt-tolerant varieties, some of which had been tried by farmers, and a water quality calendar focussing on ways of extending the period when the water is fresh);
 - making problems and opportunities explicit (particularly in the transect) so they can be questioned and discussed openly; and,
 - encouraging individuals who might otherwise have remained silent to speak up. For example, several women commented on a fire-wood calendar saying that it was unrealistic - the real situation was much worse.

The way the diagrams were used in these village meetings also taught us much about the social structures in the villages. For example,

an elderly Brahmin villager took much time to explain the diagrams to the men and women and clearly had respect. He was identified as an important contact for AKRSP (1) and indeed became chairman of the village organisation which was formed after the village meeting. In another village, the authoritative domineering manner of the village chief became obvious as he took control of the meeting, using diagrams to try and 'blind by science' the other villagers. A possible threat to his leadership became apparent as a young man continually questioned the chief's comments and criticised his presentation. It turned out that this was an ongoing power struggle which we only learned about at this late stage of the RRA.

Limitations

- Some of the diagrams are too complicated to be widely accessible. This is especially true of the transect. We tried to avoid this problem by presenting the transect as a dialogue, with an RRA team member asking one of the leaders about the transect as it was held up – e.g. "what particular problems are there in the grazing land?", and the leader would respond by reading out the problems listed in the transect.
- Related to this point, the wording in the diagrams needs to be minimised. We used some colour coding in the seasonal calendars to represent the three seasons, rather than writing out the months. Better ways need to be found for representing issues pictorially.
- Even with clear and simple diagrams, their usefulness is limited if the size of the meeting means that a proportion of the audience cannot see them.
- The diagrams we used were drawn by ourselves, the RRA team, and although frequently amended by the villagers still showed signs of outsiders' perspectives. In particular, the map - drawn conventionally with north to the top - proved to be upside-down as far as the leader who presented it was concerned. He ended up turning it upside-down to avoid confusion! Local people should have been involved in the initial drawing of the diagrams.

Overall I think the use of the diagrams was a successful experiment, especially as they were presented by the community leaders. Many adaptations are needed, and I am sure there is still much undiscovered potential for diagrams as tools for participatory analysis and decision-making.

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