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Participatory Rural Appraisal: is it culturally neutral? Thoughts from a PRA in Guinea-Bissau

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A pilot project was implemented in Guinea-Bissau to explore the methodology of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) as a tool for village based community development workers. An in-service training was given jointly to a group of expatriate and host country development workers. Additionally, needs-assessments were done in two villages to test the PRA process as a programming instrument for village based workers. In its general form, PRA is a variation of Rapid Rural Appraisal and emphasises an especially broad scope of community participation in identification and prioritising of needs and solutions. Rapid Rural Appraisal teams characteristically include individuals from outside the host community. Consequently, there is a prominent cross-cultural aspect to the team's activities, and cultural predispositions are interwoven throughout the PRA process and reflected in the resulting conclusions and recommendations. The Guinea-Bissau activity sought to test a variation of PRA which would address the somewhat unique circumstances of expatriate development workers who are village based for extended periods of time - persons not faced with the constraints of time usually associated with Rapid Rural Appraisal applications. During the process of our work we became contemplative about the power of the PRA to catalyse change and the role of outside change agents in addressing the values and beliefs of a community. The following rationalisation resulted from our philosophical ramblings, and is believed to hold thought-provoking implications for all who are concerned with development issues.

We spent several days in each of the villages of Pelundo and Bara. We were graciously

invited into the homes of the community, we joined the men and women at work in their fields, we shared food at their tables, we drank their wine, we joked with the children, and we talked of aspirations and exchanged questions about the quality of life in our respective countries. Throughout it all, we were struck by the sense of well-being and absence of compelling felt needs among the village residents. The village environment was idyllic in a pastoral sort of way. But nevertheless, according to our standards the people worked too hard, ate too little, infant mortality was high, and the general conditions of health and sanitation left much to be desired.

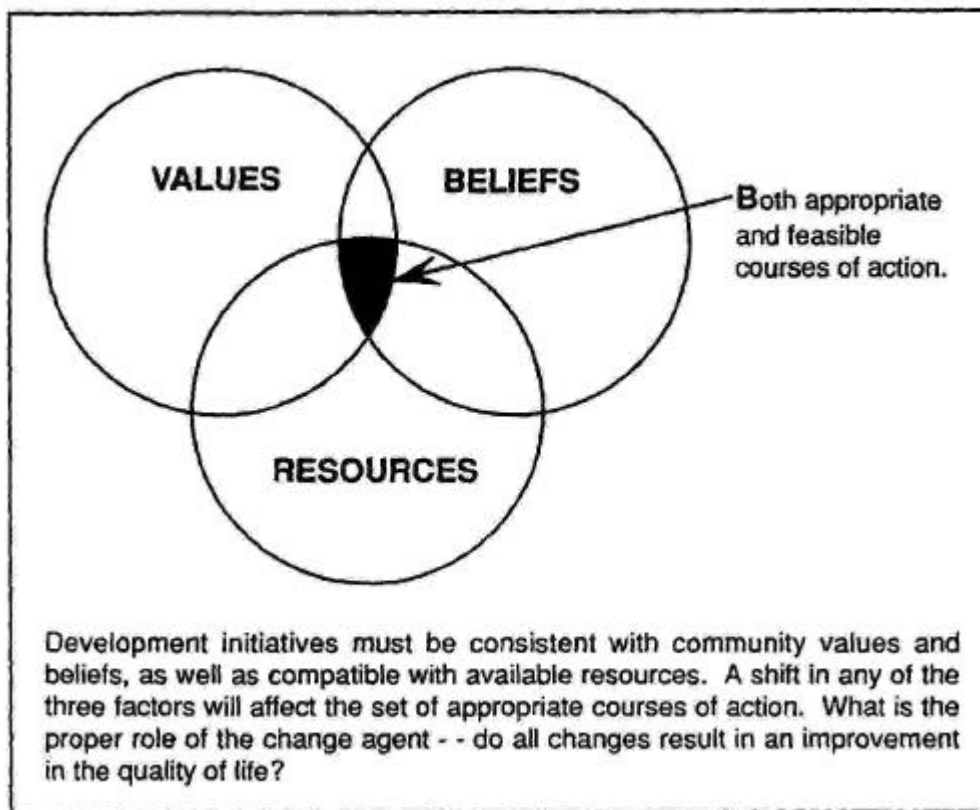
During the off hours we pondered this paradox. The apparent inconsistency between our perceptions and those of the villagers seemed to be a matter of cultural values and beliefs. This line of thought led us to wonder to what extent it is indeed appropriate for outsiders such as ourselves to tinker with a society's cultural foundations. Likewise, in order to generate an opportunity to make changes in the life of the village must we inadvertently create in their consciousness a sense of ill-being and discontent? What are the limits to the role of outside development agents in catalysing community change?

If the answers do hinge on the issue of values and beliefs, exactly does this imply - and what do we mean by 'values and beliefs'?

It seemed to us that ‘beliefs’ are ideas concerned with how the world is put together. That is, concepts of reality... such as ‘disease is caused by spiritual disorder’ versus ‘disease is caused by germs’. We tended toward the conclusion that it is consistent with human nature to want to understand more about how the world is put together. So, we concluded that it is a proper role of a change agent to engage in exchange of knowledge about fundamental natural processes.

Values, we decided, may be a different matter!
 Values, we concluded, are ideas about the way

things should be. For example, ‘the wives in a polygamous family should pool their agricultural produce for the benefit of the entire household’ versus ‘each wife is responsible for feeding only herself and her own children within the household unit’. The danger of many development interventions is that judgements are sometimes made by outsiders about what is needed in a village without due respect for the proprietary nature of a community’s values. This may be complicated by confusion over distinctions between values and beliefs in the minds of outsiders.



Our reasoning brought us full circle in our effort to identify the felt needs of our host community. The process that we were using was founded upon the ideal that any development initiative would be doomed to fail if it is not consistent with a community's values and beliefs. How far should we go in attempting to influence these values and beliefs in order to promote our 'enlightened' ideas about what their future should be? That is, should we seek to overlay our values on those of the host community? We decided that the answer is no.

We grew comfortable with the process that we were employing. When properly applied, PRA seems to be well suited for maximising possibilities and placing intervention activities in step with the community value system. Beliefs are perceptions about what is possible; the PRA process works to help the community generate ideas about what is possible. Values are perceptions about what is appropriate from among the possibilities.

We became increasingly confident that the PRA methodology can be especially effective in addressing the goals of cross-cultural understanding and catalysing development initiatives that are consistent with the felt needs and values of a community.

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