

5

The outsider effect

Ueli Scheuermeier

RRA Notes 9 got me thinking, particularly the contribution by Weyman Fussell. He raises a very important issue in his account of PRA in Guinea Bissau: What is the role of 'outsiders' in RRA, and how can this role be acceptable to both 'outsiders' and 'insiders'? I've become sensitive to this, as I've now experienced RRA's both as an outsider (i.e. I was the expatriate on the team) and as an insider (i.e. the RRA was done in my own culture, with me having to translate between an outsider and my own culture).

There always is this unasked and never answered question: what's that foreign guy doing here? Why is he here? Consider the old lady in front of her house being informally interviewed by some members of an RRA-team. Of course it may be interesting for her to discuss and explain about life in the village, maybe even piling little cards into neat heaps (wealth ranking etc.). And yes, maybe she even knows why precisely they're asking all those questions and probing and prodding in a friendly manner: it's because they're trying to find out what would make sense in developing her village etc. and that foreigner must somehow be in on it because obviously there must be some sort of 'wisdom' or knowledge coming from him. But still: why is he here? What makes him tick? How come he's interested in the problems of her village, seeing he comes from such a far away place and going back there again? - I've always come away from such encounters with an awkward feeling of voyeurism.

I am glad Weyman Fusell writes that outsiders are agents of change. And he's quite right in pointing out that they act on the prevailing beliefs and values. I find his distinction between the two quite useful. However, it's not really as clean-cut as is suggested. The conclusion that 'it is a proper role of a change

agent to engage in exchange of knowledge about fundamental natural processes' does not include process of decision-making in communities. Such social processes are also fundamental, and just as important, and they border on the values. Repeatedly I've been drawn into discussions on the way we make our decisions in Switzerland (usually by colleagues on RRA-teams), and there was no point in trying to evade them, because they were right on the topic at hand.

Furthermore, I find there is an implicit assumption that traditional values are always 'good' and should not be manipulated or 'bulldozed'. Certainly there always has to be respect for the reasons why the local value-system developed. However, we sometimes do run into trouble, e.g.: the belief that there are intrinsic differences between humans (due to karma), leading to a caste-system whereby serfdom is explained - well, that's a bit hard to take for an European brought up on an egalitarian background. Or: psychic power being exerted to the detriment of others in the community (black magic, etc.) is not something to be taken lightly.

So what are we to do as outsiders whenever we're on an RRA (or PRA for that matter)? Where does this lead to? The following rather preliminary points come to mind:

- a) I just don't see how outsiders can stay aloof from local values. Outsiders must enter a process of interaction with the insiders on both beliefs and values. Of course this interaction has to be based on mutual respect. However, respect cannot mean holding back with your own opinion. Holding back would lead to voyeurism. My own opinion - clearly stated as such and presented as something up for debate - may tell the lady in front of

her house what makes me tick, and it may get both of us thinking!

- b) My observation is that insiders are always puzzled at why an outsider is around. Due to sheer politeness (and very often bewilderment) they don't ask the hard questions: what the hell are you doing here, and why do you think I should be answering your questions? Making the role of the outsider explicit and explaining it to insiders enhances trust enormously. However, most outsiders I've come across (including myself) actively evade and fudge on the reasons for their being around, often giving technical or methodical reasons - never personal reasons. It's the personal reasons the lady in front of the house is wondering about!
- c) Let's face it: outsiders always change local beliefs and values. There's no point trying to avoid it. Besides, that's what I would suggest is precisely what outsiders are for in an RRA: ensure another perspective of the local situation from which new insights into the system are gained by the insiders (new 'beliefs'), leading to new ideas as to what should be done (new 'values').
- d) The decisions for action ultimately have to lie with the insiders, as only they know the complexities of the local system well enough. This accords with Weyman Fussell's 'catalysing development initiatives that are consistent with the felt needs and values of a community'. However, with c) in mind, one would have to accept that these needs and values change due to the outsider input.
- e) Somehow outsiders have to learn that the problems and chances of the village where the 'lady in front of her house' lives concern them personally too in some sort of way. This personal concern (which should have nothing to do with any helper-syndrome) is what makes outsiders credible to insiders as real partners in getting on with a project, a program, an RRA.
- f) What's an outsider, what's an insider? Here I was rambling on the notion that

outsider would mean an expatriate from another culture. But obviously an urbanite would be an outsider in the village, or even the neighbour would be the outsider in a household. And besides, we're all insiders when it comes to looking at things with a planet-wide perspective. So some thought might have to go into the demarcation on outside - inside....

I am aware that here we are touching on very personal issues of motivation and justification among the people who 'do' RRA's, and I know it's sometimes painful to confront these issues. Still, I would be glad to hear from other RRA-practitioners how they cope with the never expressed, but always present question: 'what on earth are you doing here? Why should I answer your questions?' and maybe there are some who already have experience in 'coaching' outsiders: how do you translate the reason for the presence of outsiders to local people?

• **Ueli Scheuermeier**, Alexandraweg 34, 3006 Bern, Switzerland.