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Shoulder tapping: a technique of training in Participatory Rural Appraisal

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A group of District officers were taken on a transect to see the problems of soil erosion and the scope for watershed development. I told them in advance that a transect in PRA is for observation and to understand the knowledge and perception of the farmers. We do not advise, we ask - but ask open questions without implied advice. I told them that this was very difficult for educated persons, more so for those in authority. Therefore, when I found anyone giving advice or asking a question with implicit advice, I would tap his shoulder and if necessary offer my services for rendering the advice-query into an open ended question.

Six of us then set out in the mid March 1991 afternoon of not-so-hot weather to visit farm lands of a village in a drought prone Block. We were led by Dudhabhai, extension volunteer trained by Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in watershed techniques, and five other villagers. In the midst of a treated watershed, a visiting officer started, "This is a wrong place for a spillway in the earthen bund. It should ..."

I tapped his shoulder and asked Dudhabhai on behalf of the knowledgeable officer, "Why have you placed the spillway at this point?"

He replied, "Water collects here from two sides of the bund, and the spillway carries it further down without damaging the earthen bund." I continued on behalf of the visitor. "But suppose you had put it at some other place, say here?"

"It would be costlier", Dudhabhai answered.

The visiting officer, who wanted to advise was satisfied. But another jumped in, "You should not collect earth...."

"Sir, you are advising, what do you want to say?" I intervened in English.

"Earth should be collected from the upward slope of a bund so that levelling process is speeded up", he explained. I asked on his behalf. "Why do you collect earth from both sides for constructing a bund?"

Dudhabhai was ready with explanation, "Bunding work should result in minimum loss of cultivated land. Taking earth from both sides, the depression formed is shallow. We are able to raise a crop very close to the bund"

This whetted the officer's curiosity. "Did you in fact?" I did not intervene.

"Yes sir, but it failed - no rains"

We moved on. Another officer felt irresistible need to advise, "You should put grass...." I tapped his shoulder, "This is advice. May I ask on your behalf?" He nodded, a little amused.

"How do you ensure protection of earthen bund from rainwater?" The village group mentioned that they tried two varieties of grasses to strengthen the bund but the seeds did not sprout on account of failure of rains. They also mentioned strengthening of bunds through raising of other shallow root crops like 'math'.

Moving on, the group stopped at a surface well that was obviously abandoned halfway. The soil conservation officer, noticing that the well was in a corner of a field at the end of a

“Yes”.

I changed the advice into a PRA mode, “Is there any use of this half done well?”

Ukabhai, a leading member of Gram Vikas Mandal, promoted by AKRSP, replied thoughtfully, “If a channel is made to bring water off that slope”, he pointed out his finger in a direction and continued, “the well will get filled up, like a pond. Its water could be used to save a withering crop”. I turned to the expert who was largely satisfied.

Discussion on digging out a large pond to store run-off was conducted by the Director of District Rural Development Agency, and I found that there was hardly any need to intervene. The discussion was on the advantages and disadvantages of a shallow pond covering a larger area versus a small but deep pond. The villagers simply said, “We will deepen the pond till we strike rock, then cover more ground”. The disadvantage of evaporation losses in a shallow spread out pond was never mentioned by the villagers, but the Director resisted the temptation of teaching. My presence perhaps reminded him that in a PRA transect you should not teach, only learn. And he did learn about an unexpected disadvantage of an unguarded deep pond - animals might fall in it! As we proceeded my intervention was somewhat reduced and the visitors learned more about falling water level in irrigation wells, suitability of different fruit trees in their village, and more.

Quite an achievement in half a day. But to make the achievement last, it has to become assimilated in a person’s way of thinking and communicating. As Robert Chambers would say: basic reversals are needed - from the overbearing authority, advising and ordering, to a curiosity to learn, and to a respect for those who are apparently ordinary. Is it possible to foster such attitudinal change only in PRA without developing an overall

democratic approach genuinely to know an other person’s point of view, not only with villagers, but also with staff, friends and maybe with members of one’s own family? Can one ask open ended questions without an open mind? However, even if it starts mechanically and artificially, PRA exercises can contribute to opening of minds, more so if someone is around to tap the shoulder when investigators start to advise when they should be listening and learning.

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