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Community participation in small and big villages

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- **Community participation**

Community participation is considered to be the acid test for the success of any rural development programme, sponsored either by the government or non-government organisations. The success or failure of several rural development projects is directly linked to active or lack of community participation, as making the community take part in the development process is not merely considered as a means but as an end in itself. Conceptually, it refers to the process by which the people involve themselves in analysing the local situation, identifying major problems, formulating action plans, mobilising locally available resources, executing development projects and monitoring and evaluating projects in order to assess the benefits extended to the community at large, or specific target groups, during a given point of time.

We had been using the conventional method of visiting the community, holding group discussions and organising mass meetings in order to ensure the participation of the community in the process of problem identification and plan formulation. Later, scientific social surveys were conducted among individual households through structured interview schedules and other tools for accomplishing the above objectives. Recently the use of PRA, Participatory Rural Appraisal, has grown precisely to perform these tasks systematically.

Participatory Rural Appraisal broadly aims at enabling the rural people to assemble together, analyse their past, examine their present and envisage their future by assessing their socio-economic and geographic situation, identifying their problems, exploring locally available resources, hammering out feasible solutions

and formulating action plans realisable during a certain time span. In the whole exercise, local people constitute the actors as well as the audience, and the outsiders serve merely as observers and at times facilitators, but seldom as intervenors or interruptors.

- **Diverse villages**

Villages, as a whole, vary in terms of their content and character, with plenty of structural and functional diversities across regions or even within a particular region. There are small and big, homogenous and heterogeneous, progressive and poor, cooperative and conflicting, educated and illiterate, and potential and resourceless villages sharing characteristics but at the same time, retaining their individual identities.

Gandhigram Rural University in Tamil Nadu, active in the field of rural extension services, has been organising Participatory Rural Appraisal workshops in different village settings (sponsored by the Ford Foundation). Conducted in the villages of native Anna district, the PRA Team had occasions to interact with innumerable villages with varied characteristics. During such exercises, we located a particular variable which we presumed, had a linkage with the effectiveness or otherwise of our PRA exercises. This paper sheds light on the experience of PRA in two physically diverse settings viz. small and big villages.

- **Big is a bother**

Holding PRA exercises in big villages posed various problems. The main problems were:

- dominant caste overrides the exercises;

- participation of the poor in such workshops was less;
 - women seldom come forward; even when they did, their participation was marginal;
 - problems of the village could not be comprehended in depth;
 - mapping and modelling, exercises became too difficult;
 - data were gathered and shared; plans were formulated, but they are not followed up and executed;
 - there are several kinds of leaders in big villages (formal and informal; political and non-political, traditional and non-traditional and so on). Bringing them round for a common purpose was a difficult task; and,
 - selection of participants from the village posed serious problems. We could not select the participants. Even when we suggested certain broad criteria for selecting participants, a fair representation of all the sections of the village was not given.
- **Small is smooth**

On the other hand, small villages facilitated a better execution of the PRA exercises. Specifically, they had the following advantages:

- rapport could be easily established;
- factions were less; individuals were closely related to one another; families were well-knit. There was a single line of command;
- fair representation was given to all sections of the people - young and old, poor and rich, men and women, educated and illiterate;
- participation was spontaneous and profuse;
- outsiders were not treated as strangers but with love and affection;
- the confidence of the people could be easily gained. This helped in the collection of more reliable and accurate information; and,
- exercises like seasonality, mapping and modelling could be done more easily without rushing through.

• Ideal villages

The size of the village is a factor to be reckoned with for effective PRA exercises. Based on our experience of conducting PRAs in about two dozen villages, we suggest the following criteria for the selection of villages for PRA workshops:

- very big villages may be avoided; instead hamlets may be selected;
- small villages or hamlets with 100 to 200 families, are preferable;
- location of the village may be far away from the urban centre;
- villages which have been untouched by development agencies;
- backward villages, with scope for greater development interventions;
- villages located within a radius of about 20-25 km. from the base of the change agent;
- selected villages should facilitate frequent follow up, mostly with the initiation of local people;
- households, belonging to the village should be concentrated and not scattered; and,
- leadership atmosphere should be conducive in the village.

The above guidelines were derived out of our constant linkage with the far and near villages where we conducted PRA workshops. Villages which satisfy the above requirements would be ideal settings for PRA workshops.

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