

## Editorial: training for learning

### • Introduction

For the occasion of the joint IIED/IDS “*Beyond Farmer First: Rural Peoples’ Knowledge, Agricultural Research and Extension Practice*” workshop, held in October 1992, Robert Chambers and I wrote about the need to move towards a new learning paradigm for agriculture and rural development. This would mean a quest for both a new professionalism and new institutional settings in the search for sustainable and participatory futures (Pretty and Chambers, 1993a, b).

As many readers will agree, recent years have seen the growing strength of a new world view in agriculture. The transfer of technology approach for agricultural research and extension which has served for industrial and green revolution agriculture has been recognised to fit poorly many of the conditions and needs of complex, diverse and risk-prone agriculture. In this paradigm, research decisions are made by scientists and technology is developed on research stations and in laboratories, and then handed over to extension to pass on to farmers. In the complementary farmer-first paradigm, farmers’ needs and priorities are put first, and farmers participate in research and extension. When this is done, the potential of the ‘resource-poor’ becomes greater than previously supposed. But to achieve true participation, putting farmers’ priorities first, facilitating their analysis, and supporting their experimentation, requires changes which are personal, professional and institutional.

### **New learning approaches and environments**

The central concept of the new paradigm is that it enshrines new ways of learning about the world. Teaching and learning, though, are

not the same thing. Teaching is the normal mode in curricula; it underpins the transfer of technology model of research; and it is central to many organisational structures (Ison, 1990; Bawden, 1994). Universities and other agricultural institutions reinforce the teaching paradigm by giving the impression that they are custodians of knowledge which can be dispensed or given (usually by lecture) to a recipient (a student). But teaching can impede learning. Professionals who are to work with local complexity and diversity need to engage in sensitive learning about the particular conditions of rapid change. Where teaching does not include a focus on self-development and enhancing the ability to learn, “*teaching threatens sustainable agriculture*” (Ison, 1990).

There is little experience of institutional reform that has put learning approaches at the core of education. A move from a teaching to a learning style has profound implications. The focus is then less on what we learn, and more on how we learn. Institutions will need to provide creative learning environments, conditions in which learning can take place through experience, through open and equal interactions, and through personal exploration and experimentation. The pedagogic goals become self-strengthening for people and groups through self-learning and self-teaching. Russell and Ison (1991) indicated that in this new mode of research and development “*the role and action of the researcher is very much a part of the interactions being studied*”.

### **New institutional settings**

Many current agricultural institutions, whether universities, research organisations, or extension agencies are characterised by restrictive bureaucracy. They have centralised hierarchical authority, specialised disciplinary departments, standardised procedures, and uniform packaged outputs. Personal promotion

and institutional survival depend less on external achievement, such as farmers adopting the products of research, and more on internal criteria, such as performance according to professional norms and public relations with funding sources. Such institutions are stable partly through self-deception. They are sustained by modes of learning which present misleading feedback from the peripheries, giving falsely favourable impressions of the impact of their packages and programmes.

Institutions that respond better to open learning environments and participatory methods must be decentralised, with an open multidisciplinary, flexible teams, and outputs responding to the demands of farmers. In these conditions, personal promotion and institutional survival should depend more on external achievement, such as responding to farmers' diverse expressed needs. The new institutions will be learning organisations, with realistic and rapid feedback flows for adaptive responses to change. Multiple realities will be understood through multiple linkages and alliances, with continuous dialogue between different actors.

### **Old and new professionalism**

The new roles of farmers, the new participatory approaches and methods, and the new learning environments, all imply new roles for agricultural scientists and extensionists. Scientists must continue their normal science, in laboratories and on research stations. But in addition, they will have to learn from and with farmers if they are to serve diverse and complex conditions and farming systems. The new roles for outsider professionals include convenor for groups; catalyst and consultant to stimulate, support and advise; facilitator of farmers' own analysis; searcher and supplier for materials and practices for farmers to try; and tour operator to enable farmers to learn from one another (Chambers, 1992; 1993). These new

roles require a new professionalism with new concepts, values, methods and behaviour.

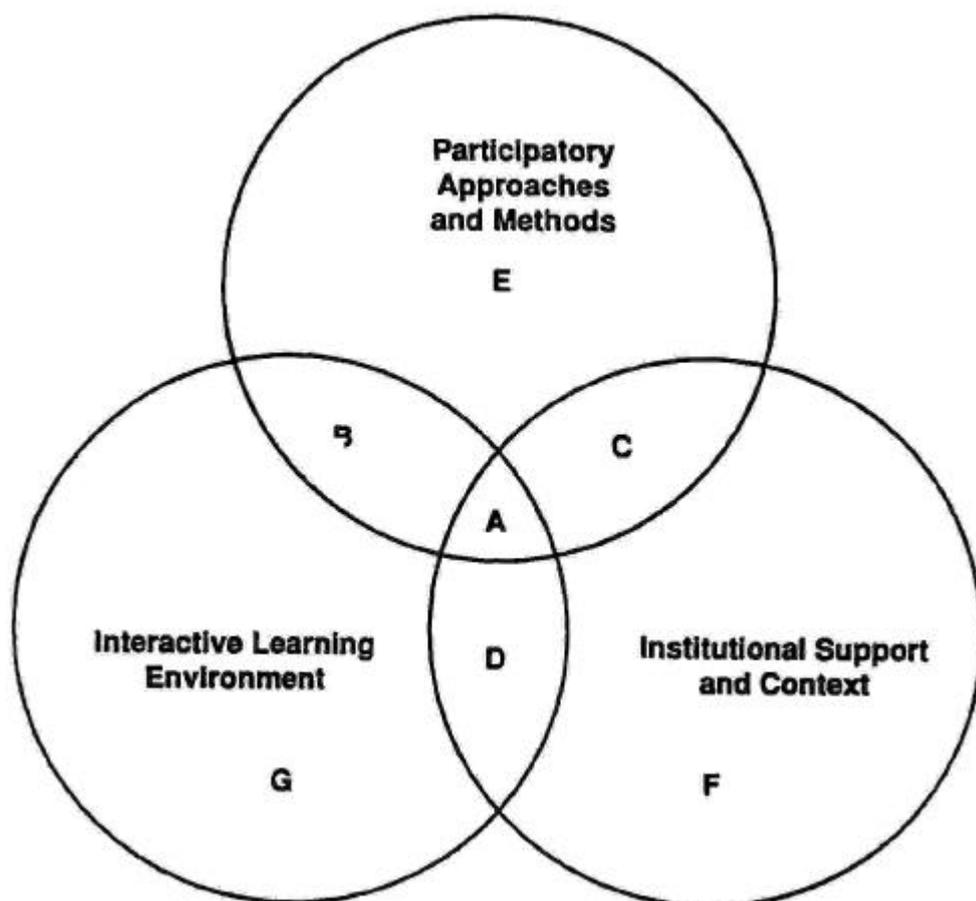
Although to characterise an old and a new professionalism is to risk polarised caricature between the bad and the good, the contrasts are clear. Typically, old professionals are single-disciplinary, work largely or only on research stations, are insensitive to diversity of context, and are concerned with generating and transferring technologies. The new professionals, by contrast, are either multidisciplinary or work closely with other disciplines, are not intimidated by the complexities of close dialogue with farmers and rural people, and are continually aware of the context of inquiry and development.

### **Three factors for success**

This vision for the future, in which the new professionalism becomes the norm in new institutional structures and partnerships, has already been achieved in certain places. There are, for example, an increasing number of environmental and economic successes in complex, diverse and risk-prone areas, where agricultural and economic regeneration has occurred. Local groups supported by new professionals working in enabling institutions have increased yields, reduced environmental impacts, built capacities and resilience, and reduced dependencies. For this vision, evidence suggests there are three essential areas to tackle. These are new methodologies for partnerships, dialogue, participatory analysis and sharing; new learning environments for professionals and rural people to develop capacities; and new institutional environments, including improved linkages within and between institutions.

These three areas for action are shown in Figure 1 as intersecting circles (Pretty and Chambers, 1993a, b). The most sustainable solutions lie in the overlapping central sector.

**Figure 1. Conceptual framework for a new learning paradigm (from Pretty and Chambers, 1993a, b)**



The following assumptions underlie this conceptual framework:

- participatory approaches and methods support local innovation and adaptation, accommodate and augment diversity and complexity, enhance local capabilities, and so are more likely to generate sustainable processes and practices, represented by the ECAB circle;
- an interactive learning environment encourages participatory attitudes, excites interest and commitment, and so contributes to jointly negotiated courses of action, represented by the GBAD circle;
- institutional support encourages the spread between and within institutions of participatory methods, and so gives innovators the freedom to act and share.

This is represented by the FDAC circle, which includes where a whole organisation shifts towards participatory methods and management, and where there are informal and formal linkages between different organisations.

In this perspective, sectors G, F and E represent starting points and preconditions, but none is likely to spread well unless it receives support by moving into D, C or B, and then into A.

Thus, participatory methods, as in E, are likely to be abandoned unless there is institutional support or a learning environment. This has been a recurrent experience with field training workshops in PRA. Those who have taken part may be convinced, and wish to introduce participatory methods into their organisations, but find they cannot do this alone. Partly they may lack confidence or clout, but also their

colleagues may be sceptical or hostile. I remember being involved in a series of training courses on an upland agriculture project in Asia in 1987. They were successful at the time. Everyone appeared to enjoy them, and the course evaluations were positive. Some five years later I heard more feedback about the institution. Participants had indeed enjoyed the course, and remembered many details. But it had not changed anything. None of the methods were being used. No changes in the relationships between scientists and farmers had occurred as a result of the course. A critical factor was the lack of direct support from within the institution, particularly from the top, and the lack of linkages made to other local actors, such as NGOs.

Sector G on its own, a creative and participatory learning environment without institutional support or participatory field methods, is typically marginal, vulnerable, and short-lived. Such environments tend to rely on one person or a small group, and to disappear when the person or group moves or is moved out. Where there is institutional support for participatory modes, as in F, it is liable to remain only rhetoric and intent unless expressed through a participatory learning environment and/or the use of participatory field methods. Examples are known where a director has been convinced of the value of participatory methods but staff, wedded to top-down methods of investigation, have resisted reform. In consequence, nothing much has changed.

In sector A, support within institutions exists at the top, and authority is more decentralised. Linkages are encouraged with other institutions, whether NGO, government or local organisations. The learning environment focuses on problem-solving, and is interactive and field-based. Behaviour and attitudes are democratic, stressing listening and facilitation, not didactic teaching. Local groups and organisations are supported, and encouraged to conduct their own experiments and extension, and to make demands on the system.

Examples of these conditions, or conditions close to them, can now be found in a growing number of countries and contexts. The papers in this issue of *RRA Notes* are seeking to explore how we can better understand the

process of moving towards sector A in the Figure. Many issues are identified in the 26 papers that are important for trainers and facilitators of learning.

### Location of the training

One important theme emerging from many of the papers is the effect the location of the training workshop can have on the success of the training. Several papers describe the potentialities and pitfalls which the trainer should be aware of when conducting training in the following locations:

- *Universities.* Andy Inglis and Janice Jiggins highlight many of the problems encountered when carrying out training *in situ* in a university. These include a feeling of mistrust of academia that participants from outside the university bring in with them; the insecurities fostered by academic life brought in by under- and post-graduate participants; and the danger that in a university context, PRA can become pigeonholed as just another research methodology.

Mick Howes illustrates the potentials of holding training *in situ* in a university. He explains how a university can itself become the subject of PRA training exercises, enabling participants rapidly to become familiar with its functions and history, and eliminating the academic 'ivory tower' issue which can be intimidating.

Rapport building, especially when the university is already involved in projects in the community, enables links to be developed for easy fieldwork for participants. This has occurred in India, the UK and the USA (Narayanasamy, Mukherjee, and Howard). This enabled these links to be permanently forged for use in future exercises.

- *Participants' Place of work.* Kenneth Odera carried out a training exercise for NGO employees at their place of work, and warns of the disadvantages of this location in terms of constant interruptions.

- *Northern Setting*. Although still not a very widespread practice, a number of the papers in this issue have highlighted how PRA training in the North can have certain advantages. Uwe Kievelitz and Reiner Forster report on a training in Austria, which included fieldwork in an Alpine valley. They found the fact that the participants could conduct the exercises in their own language a distinct advantage in a short course constrained by time.

Mick Howes used a farm in Sussex for participants to practise their PRA methods. Being a small, family-run enterprise, the farm was not too different from the kinds of family operations which course participants would encounter in their own countries.

Neela Mukherjee found, when she conducted a PRA training course for health workers in Birmingham, that her background in the South was of great interest to the course participants, and provided many opportunities for exchanging experiences. It was a refreshing surprise for them to find a Southern trainer teaching in a Northern setting.

### Choice of participants

Several authors indicate how important it is to select participants carefully for any course or training activity. A major constraint to spread is the number of trainers available the current demand far exceeds supply. So, one strategy must be to seek better ways of developing individuals as trainers. This is not generally a quick process. The careful and strategic use of trainers for training opportunities therefore matters.

Key factors include selecting participants for field workshops who are likely to be able to spread the participatory approaches and methods, and themselves become trainers later; inviting at least two from the same organisation so that they can provide mutual support on their return; ensuring that sharing and critical self-awareness are built into participatory approaches from the start; and support and dissemination through producing and sending materials to targeted individuals.

These materials can include slide packs, reports on applications of methods and on innovations; local networking; and notes on 'how-to-do-it' for methods of learning, rather than manuals and cookbooks which are liable to inhibit self-learning.

### Fieldwork

One aspect on which most writers agree, is the importance of including fieldwork in the training. The papers presented here illustrate the range and inventiveness of ways in which trainers have encouraged participants to use the methods in real-life settings. These range from hiking to remote Indonesian villages to spend three weeks conducting PRA (Bill Duggan), to sending participants to spend time helping the residents of small Ohio towns sweep their streets (Stephen Howard and Tracy Mygrant).

N. Narayanasamy clearly shows in his paper the learning value to be obtained from using PRA methods in the field. Following fieldwork conducted in a village in Tamil Nadu, participants commented on issues which had emerged from the exercise such as the tendency for outsiders to dominate the proceedings, for members of lower castes to remain unheard, of the dangers of raising expectations and on the use of maps to focus on particular issues, especially in larger communities. These are issues which are of vital importance, yet which often only become apparent when dealing with a community directly.

### • PRA training versus RRA training: PRA as action research

Kievelitz and Forster point out that most training workshops are still more RRA than PRA-oriented, i.e., they teach ways of collecting information by an "*outside 'expert' group rather than stimulating self-analysis within a local group*". They go on to say that if the training is to be more PRA-oriented, it is likely to turn into 'action research', and then one is faced with the ethical issue of how far a follow-up of this initiated process can be guaranteed. Their advice is to collaborate through an intermediary organisation who are willing and able to continue the process, once initiated by the training programme. James

Mascarenhas also discusses this issue. He notes that since PRA is such a powerful approach, it is bound to generate information on needs and expectations, but the tendency for most organisations is to then back away.

Kavita Srivastava, commenting from the point of view of a new PRA participant, makes the same point. She felt that the workshop she participated in failed to emphasise that PRA is an activist, ongoing process and not just the individual, one-off activity of a researcher.

Mark Lammerink describes a course in Nicaragua which specifically trains development workers to conduct action research. Part of the training programme included participatory action research in a fishing village on the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua. By the third meeting villagers had been spurred into action forming fishing cooperatives and raising money for a new road.

*“Prominent features of this project were its emphasis on the participation of villagers in their own development, and its active presence in the village not as benefactor, but as catalyst and partner in development. This was because the methods used did not merely diagnose and appraise, but went further by sharing analysis and understanding of the local situation. This in turn led to development activities that were creative, productive and sustainable.”*

John Thompson's contribution shows that it is possible for large, bureaucratic, public agencies to make the PRA approach become reality instead of remaining mere rhetoric. Examples from Kenya and Lesotho of successful transformations by the Ministries of Agriculture illustrate the role which training has to play in this process. Senior officers who had been trained in PRA brought a vision of a more people-oriented approach, and were instrumental in training other officers within the department. However, he cautions that for these kinds of transformations to occur, a supportive atmosphere must be created which includes strong leadership for and commitment

to the participatory approach, a long-term and flexible financial involvement on the part of donors, room for experimentation and an integrated field-based training programme.

### After the training

Several papers describe their findings when following-up PRA training. One in particular describes the use of PRA techniques to follow-up and assess PRA training. Marcy Vigoda has written about how village women in Bangladesh, trained as community health workers, used PRA methods to assess their own performance. Using local natural materials, the women made maps to show in which houses they had given health advice, promoted the installation of latrines, taught about nutrition and so on. The exercise emphasised for the women themselves the impact their work was having on the community.

Another important aspect of follow-up work is to assess the extent to which PRA networks develop following in-country training. Parmesh Shah evaluated post-PRA experiences in Ethiopia and Uganda, and emphasises the importance of including the development of post-training action plans in the training workshop. These action plans are vital for ensuring that the PRA approach is incorporated into the workings of both national government and NGOs, and that the infrastructure is in place to disseminate PRA methods and developments locally, nationally and regionally.

Manu Kulkarni expresses concern that PRA will have little effect if it is not made more 'state friendly', more accessible to government use. He describes how PRA could help Indian government programmes to target resources to the truly poorest members of a community.

Critical, though, is the realisation that PRA methods do not stand alone. The methods will not provoke change. Local institutions need to be promoted and helped to develop into viable organisations, and professionals themselves must appreciate a little more the importance of their own actions. As James Mascarenhas asks "how do we use PRA as an instrument to bring about greater change?"

## New contexts for PRA

Section E of this issue details the growing variety of ways and situations in which PRA can be applied: for participatory monitoring and evaluation (Suzanne Quinney); in the highly dynamic and variable context of a floodplain community (David Thomas); to enable village volunteers to become village analysts, managers and agents of institutional change (Parmesh Shah and Meera Kaul Shah); for combining training in theology with training in rural development (Thomas Kroeck) and for analysing agricultural policy (Gerry Gill).

## PRA trainers: still learning

A number of papers, written by experienced PRA trainers, emphasise that for trainers too, there is always something new to learn. In particular, Irene Guijt highlights how PRA training (and PRA methods generally) is not gender-sensitive enough, and describes a training workshop in Brazil which encouraged participants to develop a gender-sensitive understanding of the rural community.

Alice Welbourn, Robert Chambers, Neela Mukherjee and Sarah Holden enrich their papers with a wealth of fun and stimulating ideas, including detailed descriptions on how best to use new methods for training for learning. In particular, Robert Chambers draws on the experience of many trainers in two pieces that describe 21 ways of forming groups and 21 tips for short workshops containing lots of people.

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### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am very grateful to Fiona Hinchcliffe for her valuable help in preparing and editing this issue of RRA Notes.

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