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Some reflections of a new PRA participant: the action researcher

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Whilst at the Institute of Development Studies in the UK last year, I attended a two-day PRA workshop. This was my first exposure to the principles and methods of PRA. Having been an active participant in evolving and conducting one kind of participatory action research with rural women in India, I was very interested in getting to know the principles and methods that characterise PRA. I now look forward to participating in PRA exercises in a village situation, as I have plans to take part in one in India.

I would like to also share some of my initial impressions of the workshop and of PRA.

I was intrigued by the vocabulary that has been thrown up. For example, terms such as transects, triangulation, time line. While I acknowledge that it is important to label in order to have a common language of discourse, I feel that these terms are in danger of mystifying the method. This in turn could lead to a ritualising and homogenising of the processes of PRA, giving control of it into the hands of a few, or introducing the notion of an expert for decoding and disseminating the ideas. Given all this, would it not be better to describe, in simple terms, than to label using technical terms or terms borrowed from perhaps more technical disciplines?

It struck me that most of the communication methods and aids used tended to be male-orientated - numerical, quantitative styles of codification. There was a complete invisibility of other forms that people rely on to express or communicate knowledge, feelings, hopes, dreams, visions. We have found whilst working with women that cultural forms such as songs and acted narratives provide the most natural and exciting expressions of what they

see and understand. It was in song and couplets that we found they had codified the history, including ecological history, of the region.

As far as I could understand, PRA has three crucial elements:

- Changing the attitudes of researchers so that they enable the emergence of processes which allow people themselves to collectively analyse and understand their situation (in their own categories), and to plan for the future;
- Allowing people to organise this knowledge in an idiom which is theirs, giving them control over the knowledge they create; and,
- Sharing this knowledge among diverse and ever-widening circles, (again in diverse idioms) including other groups of people, NGOs, policy-makers, government and the 'hi-fi' research world.

If these are the crucial elements of PRA, then it is more than just a method of generating knowledge or developing skills - it is a process of empowering people. This raises several important issues that have to be given due consideration in work in the field.

- How do you bring the people of a village together? And particularly how do you bring the women together? I have experience of villages in India which are extremely stratified, and although they have some formal fora for bringing all the men together (none or very few fora exist for women), the poor or the lower caste never speak in these. What then are the

processes that can enable the poor to articulate?

- Secondly, how does this empowerment through PRA get sustained and nurtured? These processes are not one-off activities, they ought to be on-going, continuous, taking various directions and presenting different challenges.

Both these issues highlight the fact that PRA cannot ever be the individual activity of a researcher. The very entry into such a process is of an activist nature, and must be seen as part of a process of activist involvement, breaking the dichotomy between researcher and activist. The PRA researcher either goes through an NGO or other existing agency which has already facilitated processes of people's reflection in the villages, or initiates such processes herself/himself which would involve building up a forum for collective analyses and an ongoing support group. These requirements of the PRA intervention were not sufficiently recognised at the workshop, nor are they at all recognised or valued in the larger world of research.

It seems to me that the issue of epistemology is also of significance here. Not only is the role of the researcher different, but the framework or set of assumptions that underlie the exercise of knowledge-generation must be different from those of conventional social science or development research. The latter try to understand the *actual* in order to move to the *probable*. Participatory research addresses itself to the *potential*, from which the *possible* can be envisioned or made real. Since the two frameworks are basically not compatible, why attempt to seek validation of this knowledge by applying the tools or standards of conventional sciences.

Close and ongoing involvement in a process is important also because it is only with the unfolding of such processes, with time, that the dynamics of power in decision-making or in prioritising of actions become visible. Often processes that seemed to have been followed in a participatory manner, turn out to reveal the perspectives of the facilitators, imposed upon the people.

I would like to share one experience that put a lot of our work in perspective. For about six years we worked hard on evolving methods which elicited poor women's issues giving recognition to and building on their forms (mostly collective) of expression, understanding and analyses. Jointly we and they created methods of solving the problems. There was a lot of emphasis on the language, culture and idiom of the poor women. And all this was sustained within a predictable support system. These women emerged as very empowered, with a wealth of knowledge and confidence.

But something went wrong. At a meeting held to discuss government policy in relation to the programme, a conflict arose. The women brought up the issue of literacy - the differences between literate and illiterate women, especially in the eyes of officialdom, with whom they were negotiating. The illiterate women expressed their insecurity in this respect, and in fact, it was truly remarkable to observe how women who had asserted their confidence and strength with local officials, families and village authorities, were rendered weak with fear of the written word. However, they also asserted their willingness and ability to learn to read and write.

The experience showed us how, in the process of building on the existing strengths of these women, we had worked on our perception of priorities, ignoring or failing to explore their potential in terms of skills valued by the mainstream, which could further strengthen them. It became clear that it was as important for the poor to gain control over mainstream methods and skills as it was to legitimise, strengthen and build on their own. A pragmatic or strategic balance between the two is important.

The notion of give and take, of a two-way process, of sharing of information, skills and knowledge is another aspect which is crucial to PRA. Again I felt this was not adequately emphasised at the workshop. Planning, decision-making and the search for alternatives depend very much on the availability of information. This is the one thing that the poor do not have access or entitlement to, that remains in offices,

panchayats etc. If PRA is not to become a one-way process, eliciting or generating knowledge from the people without strengthening their capacities to plan and act independently, this aspect must receive recognition. This is our role in PRA.

These comments are just in response to what I understood at the workshop, or have read of PRA, and therefore may come across as being out of context or as critical of PRA itself. The latter is not at all the case - my main reason for writing is to clarify my own thoughts about participatory processes and I look forward to continuing the dialogue.

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