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## Reflections of a trainer

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### • Introduction

These are a few reflections from a rewarding and I think extremely fruitful trip to Zimbabwe and South Africa in 1993. The trip was to help facilitate PRA training exercises with the National Farming Network and the Forestry Commission in Zimbabwe, and in South Africa with MIDNET and AFFRA, informal associations of development organisations.

### • Zimbabwe

My first programme was in Zimbabwe with the Natural Farming Network, a group of NGOs who are promoting organic farming, permaculture and the like. This was my first PRA in Africa. The highlights of the training were as follows:

- the PRA methods worked beautifully in opening up discussions with the villagers;
- a resource map drawn by the women which was actually an area map showing all the settlements in the area, roads, paths, streams, fields, forests etc. The map started with one sheet of paper, gradually another sheet got added and another and another, till finally we must have had a map which was about 15 feet by 15 feet; and,
- an activity list identified by the villagers. In order of priority these were land tenure, livestock husbandry, horticultural development and water harvesting.

With staff from the Forestry Commission, the purpose was to develop an agro-forestry plan for a village. The group itself consisted of people from different levels within the

Forestry Commission. It was amazing how we progressed towards a participatory plan. I was assisted by Francis Chirunga and Peter of Silveira House, who brought in a lot of richness to the programme by demonstrating various behavioural exercises. It was also great to meet up and work with Saiti Makuku.

The usual species recommended by the Forestry Commission is Eucalyptus (as in India, and for similar reasons), mainly due to lobbies for Eucalyptus plantations from industrialists and tobacco farmers, their good survival rates and the fact that cattle don't eat them. However, the women listed over 300 trees. We could not rank all of them, but an attempt was made to rank and score as many as we could.

The matrix ranking exercise, which was laid out on the floor was probably one of the largest matrices in the history of PRA! Apart from its size, it was unique in the way that the women added on classifications for each species which indicated the method of propagation, the best location for planting and quantities required. This PRA has really become a language.

Three mapping exercises were run simultaneously - one by children (who did a census of the village in half an hour), one by women and another by youths (both groups made a resource map, and also showed details of the households and homesteads).

On the subject of mapping, a new discovery in Zimbabwe was the African equivalent of Rangoli. These are floor oxides which are easily available in different colours and fairly cheap. The women loved using them. We used the same medium in South Africa.

## • South Africa

In South Africa the programme was initiated by Noel Oettle and his wife Tessa Cousins, and located in Stoefelton, a black 'homeland' in Kwazulu. The notable elements of this programme were:

- The extremely good preparation for the programme from the point of view of the choice of location and participants. Tessa and Noel told me that they had received something like 30 applications a day for the programme, from the time it was announced. We had initially planned to have 20 participants on the course but it eventually rose to 30.
- Noel and Tessa were strict about screening the participants and in the end we had a good mix of blacks and whites, men and women (in fact more women than men for the first time in my experience) and professionals from different backgrounds - NGOs, universities, the South African Government, the ANC, the Church and so on. A thoroughly enjoyable group who were so keen to learn.
- Initially the theme for the Stoefelton exercises was planning a clinic. However, by the end of the course, the group had identified additional problems: health and drinking water, as well as education, livestock management, fodder and fuel, agriculture and soil erosion. The people wanted skills training and vocational guidance for the youth. They also wanted off-farm activities. Plans for all these activities were worked out with the people.
- Throughout the PRA, the mapping (both social and resource) emerged as powerful core exercises around which matrix ranking, seasonality, Venn diagramming etc. were supplementary satellite exercises. I think this is a useful framework in which to work with PRA and explain it to participants. On each day we built on the work done the day before, i.e., using the same map or seasonality diagram to continue to add on information, triangulate and so on. We found that this was a good way of sequencing discussions and exercises. It also helped considerably

in terms of initial warm up, starting with information that the villagers were already familiar with, having themselves been the authors of it on the previous day.

## • Conclusion

In respect of future training programmes I would like to make three points. Firstly, the client organisations should make a serious effort to 'vet' the participants, as was done by AFFRA and MIDNET in South Africa. Selecting participants is worth taking trouble over as it minimises the impact of training particularly at a time when the demand for training is far outstripping the supply. Thus I think we should aim for 'training of trainers' kinds of programmes.

Secondly the exercises themselves should be conducted for real. This I would insist on, because PRA, being the powerful tool that it is, will generate information, needs and expectations. What do we do then? Why are we doing this PRA at all? I see an eagerness in individuals and organisations to do PRAs, but when information is generated which should lead to development action, everyone backs away! This aspect needs to be addressed otherwise we run the risk of promoting 'extraction'.

Finally there is the issue of community organisation. PRA by itself cannot stand. It has to be followed through with action. For that action to lead to a development process, a consistent engagement of development agencies with rural communities is needed. For the process to be managed and sustained, and become self-reliant, not only do local initiatives need to be generated and encouraged, but also local institutions need to be promoted and helped to develop into viable organisations. I am firmly convinced about this, and would like to place this question before all readers:

*How do we use PRA as an instrument to bring about greater change?*

I think the moment has arrived - we have a great opportunity, which I'm afraid if missed may never come again.

Nonetheless, every time I am amazed at the miracle of transformation that takes place in terms of 'participant flip'! The other miracle that always takes place is the one of villager participation. We've done so many of these PRA field exercises - and in varied locations and conditions too. Every time I do one, there is a small voice in the back of my head asking: "*Are villagers going to participate? Is it going to work this time? Am I going to be able to demonstrate the methods to these participants?*". And every time the same miracle takes place. Not only do the villagers participate, but they actually take over.

In my last PRA in Zimbabwe, I had the rare spectacle of the interviewers (Forestry Commission staff) reading newspapers and baby-sitting for the interviewees, a group of farm women, while they did resource mapping, matrix ranking and seasonality exercises in connection with a forestry plan. They knew what they wanted and told us so. One of the Forestry Commission staff who was with us remarked that in 30 years of extension work he had never experienced anything like this!

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