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# Some insights into training for Rapid and Participatory Appraisal in a Northern setting

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### • Introduction

Training for PRA in a Northern setting is still not a very widespread practice. At the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), a parastatal institution for development cooperation with the South, we tried this approach. The aim was to help our staff gain insights into the theory and practice of Rapid and Participatory Rural Appraisal. With a group of 16 men and women currently working on bilateral development projects or at GTZ headquarters we went into an Austrian Alpine valley called the Grosses Walsertal. The trainers were ourselves, Irene Guijt of IIED and Timmy Tillmann of the University of Tübingen.

The training was intended to be a gradual process from a classroom type clarification of the concept and methodology of RRA and PRA to the practice of the methods in a real-life situation in two small valley communities. The main theme of the week was 'Peasant Survival in the Grosses Walsertal'. This area, like many other regions in the Alps, is undergoing rapid and substantial socio-economic changes due to infrastructure development, tourism and world market conditions.

Contact with the families in the two communities was established via a former GTZ-staff member. The openness, curiosity and support by the local population and authorities furthermore stemmed from the fact that two years before a short RRA training course was held in a neighbouring community and was still considered helpful by a number of people. The experience of the local people in 'handling' foreigners (mostly tourists) certainly contributed to the hospitality we enjoyed.

The six-day's training was not meant to qualify participants to facilitate RRAs and PRAs by themselves in the future. We tried to make clear that 'soft science' methods need as much professional know-how and experience as do other types of development work. Instead we intended to inform participants about the process, possibilities and limits of RRA/PRA (which have become 'trendy catchwords' in the development world).

We also wanted to give them a taste of the merits and pitfalls of real-life application and to discuss the potential of applying RRA/PRA in their daily project routine.

The training week was therefore divided as follows:

Day One	Setting the scene: introduction to Walsertal.
Day Two	Clarifying the context, principles and main methods of PRA/RRA (visualisation, communication, mind mapping).
Day Three	Practising RRA/PRA methods (transect walks, mapping, modelling and ranking), partially with elders in the community.
Day Four	Final methods practice, preparation of field phase (institutional diagramming, interviewing, dialoguing), 'rooming in' with the people and start of the field phase.
Day Five	Further talks at the kitchen table and community gathering in the evening (dialoguing, practice of visualisation tools, focus group discussions).
Day Six	Evaluation of the practical experience and the method; reflection on the use of RRA and PRA in GTZ's project work.

We believed that such a condensed form of training was possible and effective, because of the advantages of conducting training in this particular context, i.e. being able to use one's own language, and working in a familiar physical and social environment.

It proved that this basic training approach was feasible and successful, although the main shortcoming was tight time schedule. By applying what they were learning, the trainees began to see that the inhabitants of the Grosses Walsertal were the experts on the endangered microcosm of the Alp economy, tourism development and social problems. At the same time, the methods apparently helped both parties, the local communities as well as the training participants, to see familiar problems from different viewpoints, and to discuss regional development perspectives in a larger group including local officials. The main indicator of success for us as trainers were the words of Walser families during the community gathering when discussing what they had gained from the interaction:

We experienced this group as people, who, without quick judgements, listened to us because they were seriously interested in us and our problems.

Furthermore, the training in the Walsertal gave us a lot of food for thought about the principles and practices of RRA/PRA, as well as training in these methods. Some of our learning insights are stated here in the form of 12 hypotheses which we present for discussion.

## • Learning insights

- *RRA and PRA training-by-doing, or real-life application, is a particularly good form of learning transfer.*

The Walsertal experience showed that participants became highly involved in the training because of the 'taste of real life' which grew through interaction with Austrian farmers. Even though the training was highly demanding, at times even exhausting, the participants stayed motivated throughout.

Highlights of the training were the overnight stay at farmers' homes and in the Alpine cottages, as well as the community gathering and discussion.

- *RRA and PRA training-by-doing in Europe allows for the transfer of a number of critical insights from the First to the Third World and vice versa.*

Economic structures and social change, modernisation and marginalisation are processes which have similarities in widely differing countries. It was an important insight to see such processes - familiar to most training participants from their own project processes - in a picturesque Alpine valley. On a methodological level this implied that participatory planning and action can find their place in Walsertal as well as in Burkina Faso, and on a theoretical level this proved farmers' problems, concerns and survival strategies are as limited in Colombia as they are in Austria. It could be an important contribution to world development if such learning transfers were enhanced via RRA and PRA training.

- *Experiencing RRA and PRA in one's own language intensifies learning insights, in*

*contrast to the frequent situation in when participants can only follow a PRA training via a translator or through the filter of a foreign language.*

All participants were easily able to practice the use of basic RRA/PRA methods like dialoguing, walking transects, Venn diagramming or preference ranking because they could do it in German, their mother tongue. Even more important was the fact that all participants were able to communicate in their own language during the field phase. This supported the directness, richness and reliability of the communication and allowed for intensive interactions between the participants and the Walsers. Especially when a learning process has to take place in a short period of time and a rather condensed manner to quickly reach a high degree of personal impact and involvement, learning in one's own language is almost indispensable.

- *The hands-on experience of practising methods - especially those involving visualisation and intensive interaction (ie, ranking procedures or Venn diagramming) - can be decisive for convincing a participant about RRA and PRA. This implies, however, that the practical, step-wise use of methods should first be intensively practised and reflected upon before the training group enters the field*

A number of the participants became quite convinced about the value of RRA and PRA because they experienced it through real-life application and could see its merits. However this was mostly the case with regard to the methods which were used successfully. Training room practice and giving of feedback have to be provided for to make trainees feel self-confident and at ease with particular practices. The detailed steps and the sound know-how in handling methods such as ranking are quite complex.

- *Sequencing of PRA/RRA techniques which is indispensable for real-life application, has to be given special attention when preparing the field phase.*

In classroom training sessions, the sequencing of different RRA/PRA methods can at best be explained by using case studies. When preparing for real-life application however, the

trainees have to work with a special mix and sequence of techniques. Our experience suggests that special attention has to be given to this step when preparing the actual field phase.

- *The complexity of a combination of classroom and real-life application training means that sufficient attention and guidance need to be paid to group processes between the trainees, especially before moving in to the field.*

A classroom-type training for practising methods is a many-dimensional learning process (content, self-experience, group dynamics etc.). However, complexity of the training process increases further through the combination of classroom and field application training. Additional dimensions are not only the interaction with men and women of the community, but also the very intensive team-building processes in subgroups before these trainee groups go into the field (clarification of common goals, approaches, rules, role assignments, sequencing etc.). Due to our, in this respect unsatisfying, experience we think it is essential to allow for sufficient time and guidance for these group processes, even when time constraints are tight. Otherwise it is likely that the trainees will start dealing with these neglected questions when working with the community in an often unconscious and potentially destructive way. This entails the risk of group discords spilling-over into the interaction with the community.

- *PRA training-by-doing ideally necessitates a cohesive social group or community with an explicit interest in cooperation with the training group. Thus, such training tends to become an entry into action research.*

It seems that most training workshops are still more RRA than PRA-oriented, meaning that they tend to be a means of information collection by an outside 'expert' group rather than the stimulation of self-analysis within a local group. In our case this was almost unavoidable since we had differing contacts with only a limited number of households in two Alpine communities. The ideal case would be a clearly defined social group with an interest in interacting with the training group. This would, however, imply that a local population had a certain topic, problem or

concern to deal with, thus leading a training group quickly into action research. The community gathering at the end of the field phase came closest to this, as it was organised in a way to facilitate community participation in a self-analysis process.

- *If a PRA training does turn into action research, the ethical issue as to how far a follow-up of the processes initiated can be guaranteed, immediately comes up.*

While an action research orientation would, from many viewpoints, be a very rewarding training situation for PRA, it would have to be clarified how the continuation and follow-up activities can be assured by the parties concerned. For most trainees or trainers it will not be possible to engage in continuing interaction processes with the respective communities. Therefore a collaboration with an intermediary organisation (often needed to establish contacts in the beginning), willing and able to continue the initiated process, should be aimed at and agreed upon in advance. If no further cooperation were possible, such an approach should not be chosen on the ground of the ethical dilemma involved.

- *Minimum requirements for a PRA training as action research therefore are:*
  - *seeking the explicit general agreement of the community and a possible partner organisation in cooperation with a group of trainees and trainers, and discussing the necessary arrangements in advance;*
  - *clarification of the intentions, the potential focus and content of the training among all parties concerned, most practically by means of a community/group evening at the beginning of the training; and,*
  - *reflection of the local power structure, the choice of the local partner, and the implications of this choice.*

Social settings are never without power struggles between individuals or groups with different interests and socio-economic positions. This should also not be forgotten in a training situation. The choice of cooperation with one group might be an offence against another group. Whatever the situation, it is

advisable to plan for a community gathering not only towards the end of a PRA training, but also at the beginning in order to clarify expectations, interests and issues.

- *A training-by-doing exercise in PRA with a strong action research orientation has a potential danger: the pressure on the participants to get involved in the contents can become too overwhelming to guarantee sound methodological learning insights.*

A strong topical focus in a training - as will invariably be the case with a 'PRA = action research' approach - tends to lead participants' attention more towards content issues than towards methodological problems and concerns. It has to be ensured that enough methodological reflection is provided for in every training of this kind, and that ways can be found to protect participants from too much involvement - at least during the training.

4. *The training should constantly allow participants to consider how PRA/RRA techniques can be applied in their own working environment. This intensifies learning and at the same time provides a convincing guiding theme for every participant.*

In our Walsertal training we only reflected on the practical use of PRA and RRA in participants' project work on the last day. It seems wiser to include this topic from the very first day, when principles of RRA and PRA are introduced.

- *The theoretical basis for RRA and PRA is not yet developed enough to clarify it to trainees: apparently we need to work more on the links between practical PRA insights and social theory, especially with a focus on actor-oriented approaches.*

The final issue evolving from our seminar is one with a more challenging perspective. We saw in the first days of our training that the rationale for, and the set of principles of, PRA need a stronger theoretical underpinning. We should make theories from the social sciences clearer to trainees to discourage them from using PRA only as one further 'tool kit' to repair some problems in development or to 'do participation' at one single point in project

history. PRA rests on the assumption that development cooperation interacts with fully-fledged social systems; that these systems consist of social actors who construct meanings via culture; who create different knowledge systems; who struggle over meanings and legitimation orders via discourses, power relations, and development projects. Becoming involved in these interactions, in these discourses, and these struggles via participatory methods means becoming deeply involved indeed.

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