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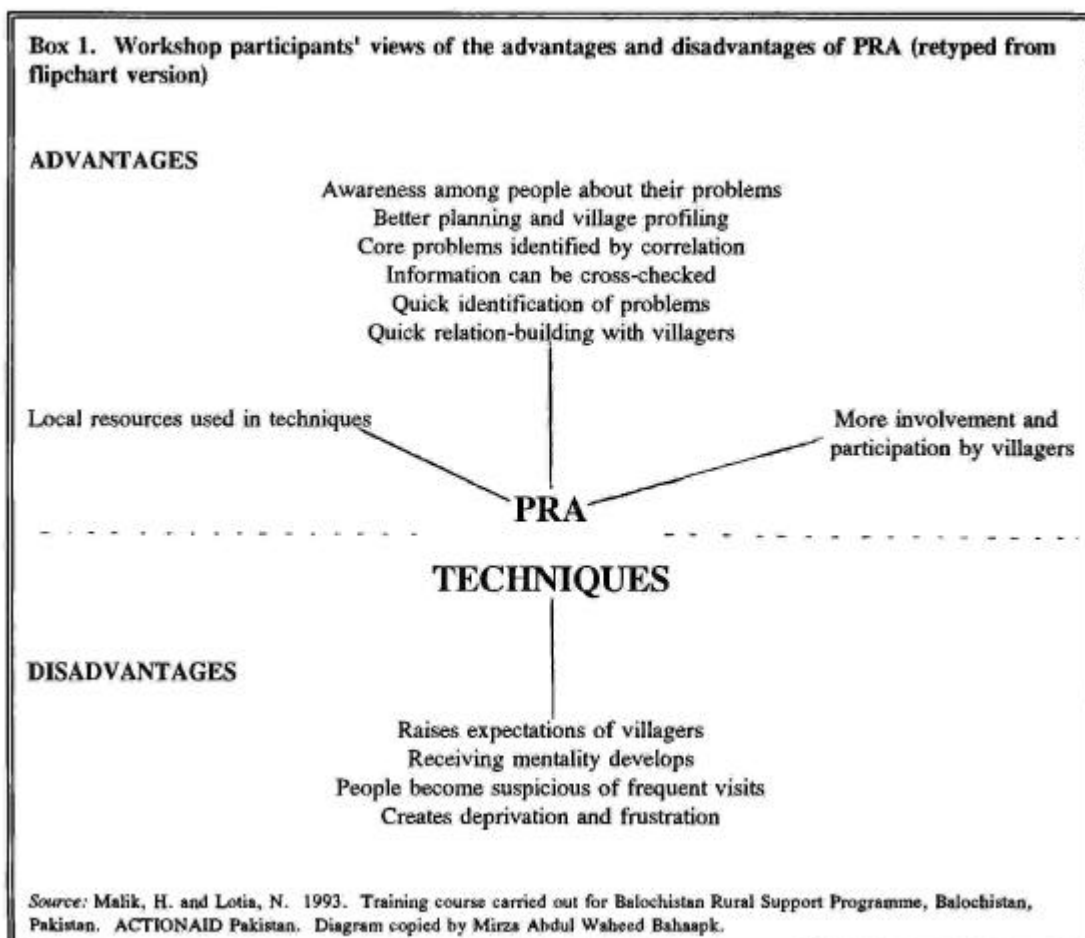# PRA and raised expectations: potentials and pitfalls

Richard Edwards

• Introduction

As PRA is increasingly used and promoted, it runs the risk of simply being seen as a one-off diagnostic tool or as a necessary component for getting proposals approved. There is also a tendency to see the output only in terms of a set of diagrams.

But PRA is not just a one-off diagnostic exercise, rather it is an attitude of mind governing how we interact with others throughout the process of development. It uses a range of ways to ensure the development of analytical skills and the mutual sharing of knowledge and aspirations so that communities are actively involved with outsiders in guiding the development process.

Often concerns are voiced about the dangers of raising communities' expectations as a result of PRA. The diagram below (Box 1) shows one example of how the participants of a training workshop held in Pakistan evaluated their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of PRA:

Box 1. Workshop participants' views of the advantages and disadvantages of PRA (retyped from flipchart version)

ADVANTAGES

Awareness among people about their problems
Better planning and village profiling
Core problems identified by correlation
Information can be cross-checked
Quick identification of problems
Quick relation-building with villagers

Local resources used in techniques

More involvement and participation by villagers

PRA

TECHNIQUES

DISADVANTAGES

Raises expectations of villagers
Receiving mentality develops
People become suspicious of frequent visits
Creates deprivation and frustration

Source: Malik, H. and Lotia, N. 1993. Training course carried out for Balochistan Rural Support Programme, Balochistan, Pakistan. ACTIONAID Pakistan. Diagram copied by Mirza Abdul Waheed Bahaapk.

Without exception, participants expressed concern that carrying out PRA raised too many expectations. Linked to this was the view that communities should not be used simply as guinea pigs for testing methods. These are indeed real concerns.

Here I argue that these criticisms are only valid when planning is inadequate and there is a lack of transparency in groups working with communities. Further still, I would argue that raising expectations is actually an objective of a PRA process.

The Importance of transparency

Clearly the degree of transparency with which we operate will affect just how valid such criticisms are. It is up to us to explain the purpose and intent of our work. In particular we should be absolutely clear about what we can and can not do for the community concerned. Frequently a lack of transparency creates a distance between the 'insiders' and the 'outsiders' and can place the outsiders in a powerful position whereby the needs of communities are not expressed and interventions not sustained.

There is no doubt that undertaking PRA raises considerable expectations within communities. The potential that initial PRA work has in breaking down barriers, letting villagers see that we are interested in listening and working with them, as well as sharing information about each others' different circumstances and needs is incredible. It is a learning process both for villagers and development agency staff. Raised expectations can generate momentum for the effective participation of the communities in their own programmes.

Often there is some reluctance to be clear with communities about precisely what the programme objectives and limitations are. For example, in one wildlife conservation programme, staff felt it was too risky to reveal to villagers that the area was unique for its biodiversity. It was felt that revealing this would give the communities too much bargaining power. Despite several years of valuable information collection, the project had not moved forward in achieving its objectives. It was only by opening this up through the dialogue of a PRA that it became clear that the raised expectations of the community could be channelled to work out the development needs and ultimately contribute to conserving the environment.

This is not unusual. Examining just what is meant by participation and the implications for us in managing our work is an essential prerequisite.

Villagers interact with numerous outsiders, many of whom have specialised roles. Villagers expect to bargain with the outsiders just as the outsiders in turn expect to bargain with the villagers. Being clear about each other's confines and conditionalities is essential in the negotiation process, as ACTIONAID discovered in one of their project areas (Box 2).

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BOX 2
.**Experiences of ACTIONAID in Pakistan**

In one area where ACTIONAID Pakistan is working (Kalinger, NWFP), villagers had been used to a strong patron-client relationship with interventions based on political affiliation and patronage. These interventions have benefitted only a very few people. When ACTIONAID started work in the area using PRA, villagers were not used to dealing with people who were prepared to listen to them. It took time to change from the tendency to demand a list of needs from the outsiders to one where people began to critically appraise their needs and suggest their own solutions.

The initial PRA raised expectations for work to start immediately. This was strengthened because several people had visited the area in the past to establish its potential as a programme site. However, it took longer to recruit staff, develop an office infrastructure, and more importantly to follow up the initial findings with more detailed thematic studies so as to develop village plans for jointly implementing schemes - in this case water and sanitation. It also required a great deal of discussion amongst ourselves to develop our principles to guide transparency. Moreover it took time with villagers to let them see just how necessary this is and how firm we would stand on our conditionalities. This was exacerbated by the fact that this was our first operational area and our credibility was still unknown.

This is a common situation. In many projects there is often pressure to achieve specified targets by set dates. Pressures from outside can tempt one to pass through this critical negotiation stage quicker and thus undermine the genuine participation of villagers and collaborating line agencies.

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The fact that PRA-based work tends to look at a whole spectrum of issues in order to discover underlying inter-relationships, could again raise expectations that the project is there to deal with all issues. A clear explanation of the project's limitations should restore the equality of the relationship with the villagers. If care is taken to explain what you as an outsider can or can not do, villagers will be more accepting and still value specialist knowledge and skills. It is essential for participation to be an integral part of the whole development process; not just at the initial diagnostic stages. Methods and approaches that reinforce the skills of communities to carry out their own analyses and appraisals should be favoured.

• **Conclusions**

In conclusion, prior to starting work with a community it is essential to clarify the objectives and limitations of the project. As long as one is clear about how one can potentially work with a community, realistically raising expectations becomes an explicit objective of the work because of its ability to generate momentum for active involvement by people in project activities. Failure to make clear the operational confines can lead to disappointment on the part of the villagers. Using a range of participatory methods throughout the project cycle is essential. PRA should not be seen as a one-off diagnostic set of techniques, but instead as an attitude of mind ensuring continuous interaction between villagers and development workers.

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