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Villagers in Sri Lanka plan their future in partnership with government development authorities

Kamal Kar, Gareth Phillips and Sunil Liyanage

• Introduction

The North Western Province Dry Zone Participatory Development Project in Sri Lanka is implemented through the Ministry of Policy, Planning and Implementation, supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and GTZ. Its main objective is to improve the standard of living of the rural poor in the dry zone of the North Western Province. It aims to do this through the formation of village resource management plans, prepared mainly by the villagers themselves using locally trained facilitators and PRA methods.

The following exercise was carried out as part of the project's training programme in which facilitators, core trainers and members of the Technical Support Team put their newly acquired skills to practical use for the first time. The seven facilitators comprised the Technical Support Team from the Departments of Agriculture, Livestock, Engineering, Land Commission and Rural Credit.

• The challenge

Notwithstanding the extent of NGO work, government departments still remain the single largest implementors of development programmes in many developing countries. As the importance of people's participation in the planning of sustainable development initiatives becomes more widely appreciated, we are thus faced with a new challenge.

Most of the success stories of participatory development approaches to date are being experienced by NGOs who generally conduct

smaller programmes covering a more limited area. Although there have been applications of the methodologies in government field institutions, experiences are rather dispersed and not systematically reviewed. It appears that at present due to international demand and internal pressure the participatory jargon has entered government departments often without substantial changes taking place. Even where the governments of developing countries are gradually bringing in changes geared towards encouraging people's participation in development, the vast and old organisational set-up and traditional functioning of the departments mostly remain unchanged and are designed to implement and administer development activities from the top down.

It has been widely noted that the behaviour and attitude of government officials and field staff are vital for the initiation and sustenance of the participatory process, and are also the key reason for distortion of and resistance to attempts to introduce PRA in government institutions.

However, it is not impossible to bring about the desired change in the functioning of government departments. The participatory approach to development demands a little more time and commitment on the part of officials, a bit of flexibility in the rigid administration, a bit of freedom for the field staff, frequent mobility and also a strong political will.

If government departments are to become successful facilitators and implementors of participatory development programmes, civil servants locked into age old hierarchical bureaucracy and accustomed to top down planning, inflexibility and even an 8 to 5 day, need to come out to the villages with

a willingness to listen and learn. Many of the attitudes and aspects of behaviour of a large number of government employees need role reversal. This is the challenge facing PRA trainers in general and this project in particular.

• **The location**

Rajakandayaya is a small village in the North West Province of Sri Lanka. The farming is a mixture of lowland paddy and rainfed upland agriculture with some supplementary irrigation, producing seasonal vegetables and staples such as beet, chilies, pumpkin, maize, cassava and sweet potato. There are some livestock visible and shrinking forest on the tops of surrounding hills. This much is obvious, but how much more could we learn about the community in the next two and-a-half days?

• **Rapport-building and information sharing**

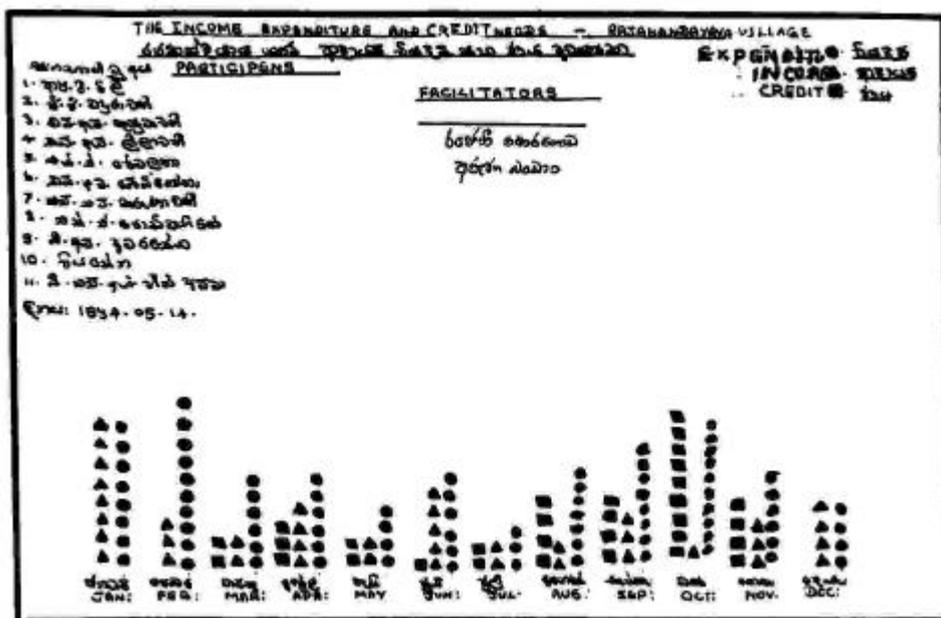
On the first evening, the team arrived in the village and joined in friendly and informal discussion with the farmers. The team stayed overnight in the villagers' houses and the following morning we met in the community hall. When 15 or 20 men and women were present the facilitators gradually started things

moving and a physical map, drawn with chalk on the rough cement floor slowly took shape. After much discussion, the map showed paddy field boundaries, roads, wells, waterways, houses, upland fields and forest. As more farmers became involved, one of us drew some away to discuss productivity trends for different crops. They identified six or seven commonly grown crops and using piles of seed, and later marker pens and paper, identified decreasing yields in several crops.

With four or five women, another team member facilitated a seasonal analysis of rainfall and cropping patterns. This showed that most rainfed crops were grown in the *maha* season from October to January. A species matrix for trees confirmed that *jak* (*Artocarpus hirsuta*) was the favourite tree, closely followed by mango and cashew. Mahogany and teak came close to last. Now familiar with the seasonal analysis technique, Ranjani and the ladies moved on to a seasonal analysis of credit demand, investment and income (Figure 1).

This shows that there is a strong demand for credit at the start of the rainy season in October. This is used to purchase seed and agro-chemicals.

Figure 1. Seasonal analysis of income, expenditure and credit needs



• **Chapatti diagrams**

Some local people were very enthusiastic and late in the evening they came to the house where we were staying. This discussion was lively and resulted in a Venn or Chapatti diagram indicating the relative importance of the women's organisation compared to the insignificant role played by the national banks and other financial institutions (Figure 2).

The most significant organisation shown on the Venn diagram is the *seettu*. This is an informal financial institution managed by the villagers themselves or by specific interest groups. The *seettu* in Rajakandayaya was managed by a group of women. Members of the *seettu* make regular payments into the fund which is used to provide small loans to members in need of credit. Because the loans are small and made to members, no collateral is required. The money is stored in cash in the village so the loans may be made immediately. Borrowers pay 10% interest on a monthly basis and this income is distributed to members on a yearly basis.

The information sharing was now complete and all the tables, charts and matrices were

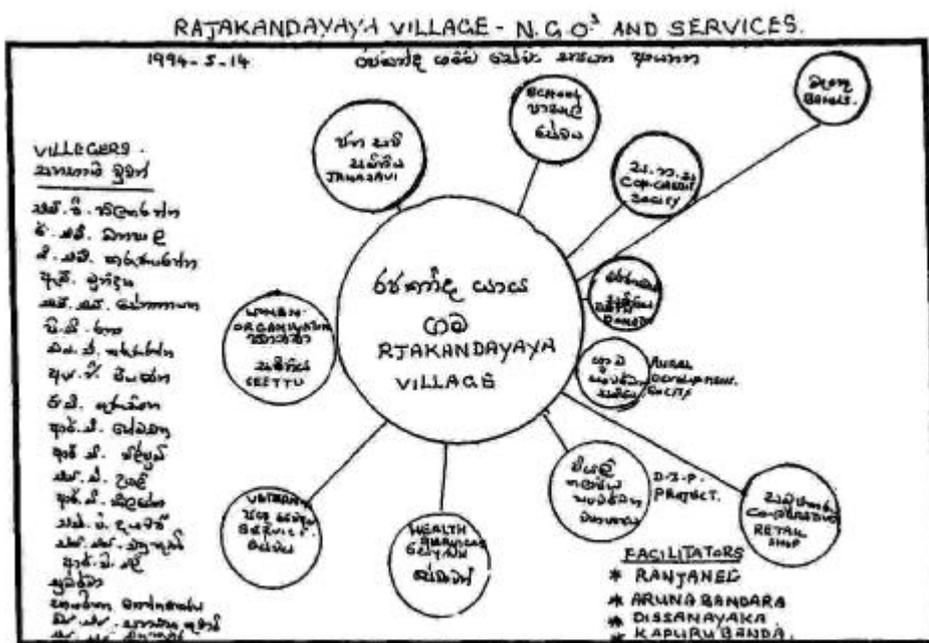
displayed to enable the villagers to cross-check and triangulate the information.

• **Problem identification, prioritisation and participatory planning**

Before breaking for lunch, a group of 11 farmers compiled a list of problems facing upland and lowland agriculture, and presented them to the rest of the farmers. This was very helpful because it focused people's minds on problem identification. When everyone returned in the late afternoon, they were quick to form groups and write down their problems on pieces of card. These problems form the basis of the Village Resource Management Plan (VRMP) (Figure 3) and as we will see, they extended beyond farming.

The importance of identifying the target group became apparent as we moved into prioritisation of the problems. For the wealthy farmers, the lack of permanent housing was the major problem. For the middle and low income farmers the market price for agricultural produce slowly emerged as the major problem, and housing was gradually moved down the list.

Figure 2. Venn diagram



- **The village resource management plan**

At this stage, the facilitators were rather disappointed because it seemed that the primary solution the villagers were working towards was one of price guarantees for agricultural products, but when they came to produce their own solutions, the picture changed. The village participants decided that the single most important problem was the poor prices received for agricultural produce. When the harvest is in full swing, prices fall very low but because the farmers are in debt, they cannot wait until the price increases (Figure 1). Without hesitation they decided that rural credit was the solution to this problem, and that all farmers could benefit from it. The other problems identified are listed, along with solutions, beneficiaries etc. in Figure 3.

- **Kamal Kar**, 10 Rammohan Roy Road, Calcutta 700 009, India' **Gareth Phillips**, Forest Research Centre, Boyagane, Kumbalpola, via Kurunegala, Sri Lanka, **Sunil Liyanage**, NWP Dry Zone Participatory Development Project, Kurunegala, Sri Lanka.

- **Conclusions**

Our experiences from this exercise are twofold. A high proportion of the facilitators, civil servants from five government departments, found the exercise very rewarding and have demonstrated a strong commitment to the participatory planning approach. This was undoubtedly helped by the attitudes of the villagers, who were enthusiastic from the start.

The transition from the appraisal to the participatory village plan has been very smooth. The rapport building, night stay, application of PRA techniques and triangulation encouraged the villagers to speak spontaneously and without reservation about their problems. The most appropriate possible solutions to the problems, the beneficiaries, the expected costs, villagers' contributions and responsibilities were openly expressed, culminating in a VRMP that included many problems and solutions beyond the scope of what the project can provide support for, but also included problems from four out of five of the areas specifically addressed in the project.

The PRA and VRMP have created a new understanding of the problems faced by the community, and in doing so, they may have helped to encourage the villagers to act together to improve their standards of living.