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Storytelling for Participatory Rural Appraisal

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• Introduction

This paper describes how we designed and tested storytelling as an approach during a PRA training course in Cameroon. Besides being the oldest form of entertainment, storytelling may well be the oldest 'method' people use to transfer culture and to discuss moral dilemmas. The rural areas of the developing world still abound in stories, hidden in people's heads and seldom told to strangers. One of the sources of our idea to test storytelling as a PRA method may have been a romantic wish to participate in this hidden world! But on a more rational level, we felt that storytelling can have three main functions in rural development work:

1. *For teaching.* Stories designed for this can convey an image in the minds of the storytellers to those of the listeners. Communicating through storytelling can be much deeper and more relaxed than through direct teaching. A good story and story-teller can easily involve people for half an hour on an issue that might normally cause embarrassment or conflict. This would not be possible using direct questioning, for example "*Don't animals have rights too?*" or "*Do you think you should protect nature?*".
2. *To elicit discussions.* Stories can be designed to articulate a problem in the village, in which the storytelling medium serves to create an open discussion platform, enhancing the self-help capacity of the village. For this purpose, the content of a story will closely resemble the actual situation in the village, and should be told in such a way as to generate intense discussion among the villagers.

3. *For learning.* In this function, stories are designed for communication in the opposite direction to that of the 'teaching stories', namely, from the villagers to the researchers. Stories are especially appropriate here for discussing sensitive issues. Although not expressly designed for this purpose, the trial story in Box 1 can be used as an example of this, since it aims to present the issue of the role of religion in environmental matters.

• The trial stories

The storytelling exploration described here was part of a course on general problem-oriented methodology and PRA held at the Centre of Environment and Development in North Cameroon. During a preparatory meeting of the PRA group, two stories were tested for their form and content. They were told by the authors to the rest of the team. The first story is reproduced in Box 1.

The line-by-line format of the story was chosen because the stories needed to be translated into the local language in the villages. The short lines mean that the translator does not have too much to remember. This resulted in a slow but natural narrative flow. The same format was also chosen by the farmers themselves when they told one of their own stories back to the PRA researchers. Another aspect of the story's form is its 'forked' structure. Two alternative decisions are put to the people in the story, and then later to the listeners.

• The village stories and discussions

After the teaching sessions the PRA group was separated into three teams to use storytelling and other PRA activities in three villages. The villages were located in landscape typical of the Sahelian zone (800mm rain per year) of North Cameroon, just south of the Waza National Park.

On the fourth day, all three PRA teams began the storytelling sessions in their villages. The basic content and structure of the stories told in the villages were essentially the same as the trial stories. However they were enriched with all kinds of agricultural and environmental details learnt from the village histories and other results of the preceding PRA work in the village.

The story-telling often took place at night, around the fire. During the preliminaries of one story-telling session, the translator spontaneously commented that the white man (one of the authors) would now relate a story told to him by his grandfather. We were concerned that this would confuse the villagers. However halfway through the second story, the village headman interrupted saying *"This may be the story told to you by your grandfather, but I have lived it!"*.

In most cases, the stories provided a useful entry point for intense discussions. In the third village the stories did not evoke much discussion, however. People merely voted for one piece of advice or another, and that was it. This may have been a result of the setting; in a special storytelling session around a fire in the dark you don't discuss agricultural problems, you want the next story to come!

The third story told by the PRA team in the third village addressed the conflict of interest between people and nature. It had been written just a few hours earlier, triggered by what people had said about their difficulties with the

authorities of the nearby Waza National Park. The story focused not on the usefulness of nature for local people but on nature's intrinsic value. The role and horrible fate of the hyena, much applauded by the listeners, had been added because a hyena, looking for a goat to eat, had to be chased from the village just the night before. It is printed in Box 2 because it illustrates the flexibility of the story-telling medium (please note that due to space restrictions, the story is not arranged by line as the trial story was). This is also the story people later said they liked best.

After the story had ended the people voted to leave the animals in peace, without any discussion. Does this really indicate a general attitude towards nature? Or does it mean that people would leave the animals in peace if only they would really come and ask? Or were people just being friendly to the storytellers? Here we were left with a feeling that a story like this may be a powerful medium to involve people in the point of view of others (even nature), but that its status as a valid tool to elicit true attitudes is very uncertain. We felt we had experienced an instance of participatory teaching rather than of participatory learning, having used storytelling for the purpose it has had since time immemorial, that is, the conveyance of culture from the storyteller to the listener. But it was greatly enjoyed by both parties, and what would be wrong in participatory teaching, if there really is something worthwhile to teach?

In the third village, after three stories had been told by the PRA team the people told back two of their own. The stories told by the villagers were very similar in style to those told by the PRA researchers. They posed a moral question to the listeners and ended in a question. It is quite possible that the storytellers chose question stories as a response to the three stories they had just heard. However, it proved that the question form of our stories was not strange to our listeners.

BOX 1
TRIAL STORY

A long time ago the earth was still young ...
There were many trees with all kinds of fruits ...
There were many plants with tubers you could eat ...
There was wildlife all around.
And people? They were only very few ...
They gathered the wild fruits and the tubers ...
They hunted the wild animals ...
And life was good. God provided for everything ...
People took their food straight from God's creation.

But slowly, times began to change ...
People multiplied, there were more and more of them ...
They needed more and more fruits and tubers ...
So that the fruits and tubers could not regrow sufficiently.
They hunted more and more wild animals ...
So that the animals became less and less.
People went around hungry ...
They did not know what to do ...
So they went to ask their wise men.
There were two of these wise men ...
And what they said was very different.

The first wise man spoke as follows:

"God has created everything ... He will never let us die.
Our problem is just a test of our faith in Him ...
So be patient, trust in Him ... God will provide!"

The second wise man spoke as follows:

"God has created everything ...
But if we take away all trees and animals ...
Where can His blessings go?
God has blessed the trees and animals with a capacity to grow ...
But if we take too many, how can they work for us?
We should not first take everything ...
And then hope that God will change His own laws.
So this is what we must do:
We should prepare a field and take some grains ...
Plant them and take care of them ...
So that the grains will grow in great numbers.
We should take some wild animals, bring them to our houses ...
Breed them and take care of them ...
So that they can multiply, and we will have a herd.
Then God's blessings will come to us again!"

The people had listened well to both the wise men ...
Both of them had said something really wise ...
And people wondered which of them they should follow.

.....
Now, we would like to know your opinion ...
Which wise man do you think the people should follow?

BOX 2

NATURE PROTECTION STORY, NAMAREDJI VILLAGE

In the beginning of the earth, God created people ... and He also created the animals. In those times, there were many animals, But there were not many people. People hunted the animals. But because the animals were so many, they did not mind very much. After many years passed that way, times began to change. People learned how to make fields and to keep cattle. So there was less forest... And people also continued to hunt... So that there were not so many animals any more.

The animals began to worry. And they decided to call a big meeting. The lion was there, he was the chairman. The elephant was there, to keep everyone in check. The rabbit was there, running around to inform everybody. All animals were present Except the hyena... The hyena was away stealing a goat from the people's village! But the animals did not like the hyena very much anyway ... And they had their meeting. The animals said:

"Look at us, we are not many any more! People make fields so that our forest declines. People hunt us so that we die...What shall we do?"

After long deliberations, they reached a decision. They would send the rabbit to find out what the people were up to. So the rabbit ran to the village. He listened to what the people were saying around the fire ... He laid his ears on the walls of the huts to listen ... And then he ran back to the meeting of the animals. He said to them:

"I have listened everywhere ... I have come to know the law that people have concerning the animals. People say that they are higher than the animals. They say they are closer to God than are the animals. Therefore, it is permitted for the animals to work for the people. And it is permitted for people to make fields and animals have to go. And it is permitted for people to hunt animals. But the people also have a second law ... The donkey, they say, must work for you ... And if it does not want to work, you are allowed to beat it. But you are not allowed to beat the donkey just because you feel like it. You are not allowed to beat the donkey just for fun. Man is higher than the animals, but God also takes care of the animals. That is what the second law says ... God has created the animals not only to serve people. Therefore, people are not allowed to beat the animals, Or hunt the animals, just for no reason."

The animals listened to the rabbit, and they discussed what he had said. Finally, they agreed with what the rabbit had told them. They said:

"This must indeed be God's law!"

And they went their way. A long time went by, and people became more and more numerous ... The forest became less and less, and people hunted more and more ... So again, the animals convened a big meeting. The lion was there again, roaring loudly. The elephant was there, standing very still.

The rabbit was there, eager for a new job. Even the hyena was there... He had just been chased away from the village... The animals said:

"Look at us! How few we are now! We used to be so many, but now we are the last! There was a time that we could go everywhere ...And now we have only this single little place to go! Another twenty years, and not one of us will be left... There will be no more lions left, no more giraffes, No more elephants, no more bush pigs, No more antelopes, no more monkeys, No more turtles, no more eagles ...Not one of us on the whole earth!"

The animals discussed this situation, and they made a decision. They would go and talk to the people.

And beg them to think about their laws. So the animals discussed which of them would go. The lion wanted to go, But the animals said people would be too afraid and flee. Also the hyena wanted to go, but the animals said:

"No! You only want to go steal another goat! You cannot go!"

contd...

They decided that three animals would go: The turtle because he could speak well ... The elephant because he would look impressive, so that people would listen properly ... And the rabbit to be counsellor, and to run back if things should go wrong.

So, the delegation started out towards the village. After a while, they saw the hyena ... The hyena was secretly following them. The elephant became very angry. He shouted:

"I know you only want to steal a goat when we are talking!"

Then the elephant lifted his big foot and stepped right on the hyena!
But the hyena was quick ... The elephant caught only the hyena's tail ... The hyena cried and begged:

"Please lift your foot off my tail! I promise never to steal a goat anymore!"

But the elephant did not believe him ... He stood silent like a rock, not lifting his foot.
The hyena pulled and pulled, until he broke free. But his tail was still under the elephant's foot ...
That's why the hyenas have no tail, up to this very day.

The turtle, the elephant and the rabbit, having got rid of the hyena, continued on their way ...
Until they arrived in the village. All the people gathered around, and sat down.

The turtle began to speak ... he explained:

"You have a law that says that man is higher than the animals. But you also have a second law A law that says that God also cares about the animals. We have become fewer and fewer
Now we have come to you to beg. We no longer have a place to go.
Please do not make more cropland. Please do not hunt us anymore.
Please do not bring your cattle to our forest."

The people of the village discussed this, and they said:

"We do not only hunt you ... you also hunt us! Will the hyena not come anymore to steal our goats? Will the birds stop eating our millet? You come to ask for something, But do you give anything in return?"

The turtle said:

"We cannot promise much. After all, we are only animals. The hyena, you know, will always be a bad guy, even without a tail! But you may chase him away anytime he comes!
And maybe, if we are with more animals again, you can hunt again."

The people discussed this, and they said:

"Why do you come to us? Why don't you go and ask other people?"

The turtle said:

"We are sorry. We cannot help this. We have no other place to go.
The only place left for us is here, with you."

.....

This is the end of our story ...

Now, we have a question for you.

The people of the village could decide between two things.

Either they could take away the last piece of forest from the animals ...

Or they could decide to leave the animals in their last home ...

Even if this would mean that the people would have less fields and less cattle ...

And visits of the hyena ...

What do you think the people of the village should decide?

• Conclusions

Environmental scientists often find themselves in a difficult moral situation. Researchers concerned with environmental protection will often need to share, discuss and negotiate with people the difference between their problems and environmental problems, such as the impact on downstream populations, on nature and on future generations. Storytelling may be an appropriate way to enter into this process.

It is often said that PRA methods should be fun, giving back to the villagers something in return for their precious time. In that sense, storytelling is a perfect method, also for the researchers. This is especially valuable because going into sensitive or difficult matters such as village conflicts or abstract responsibilities can easily become boring or create tensions and biases. An obvious addition to the work reported in this paper would be to tell and discuss stories with men and women separately.

All in all, we hope to have indicated in this paper that storytelling can be a valuable addition to the PRA repertoire, adaptable to many questions and situations. We also hope that other researchers will apply the method and share their experiences with us.

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NOTE

This paper is based on a longer version, available from Wouter De Groot at the address below. The full version provides the entire text of 12 stories, including those told by the villagers to the researchers.

REFERENCE

De Groot, W.T. 1992. *Environmental Science Theory; Concepts and Methods in a One-World, Problem-Oriented Paradigm*. Elsevier