

## Editorial

### Critical reflections on the practice of PRA

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#### • Introduction

PRA is now widely used in development research and planning, training is taking place in all corners of the globe and PRA is becoming a routine demand in consultancy work. But whose interests does it serve and what has the impact been? What kind of local participation actually occurs in practice? And what is at stake for those involved? Does PRA lead to sufficient understanding of local contexts to advocate for action? Has PRA become a ‘flag of necessity’ (Richards, this issue) with which to seek funding? Or does its growing use represent a genuine willingness in organisations to seek reorientation and innovation? As the use of PRA spreads, such questions are increasingly being asked.

PRA has proven to be a powerful and often beneficial strategy for participatory development. Its widespread use in diverse contexts signals the extent of its appeal. And some of the results have been impressive. Using PRA has helped, in some settings, to:

- Empower marginalised communities and groups, by encouraging them to analyse local conditions, giving them confidence to assert their priorities, to present proposals, to make demands and to take action.
- Seek and enable the expression and integration of local social diversity in otherwise standard programmes.
- Pursue community-based processes for development, including appraisal, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Identify local priorities for research and initiate participatory research, with scientists becoming more receptive to local knowledge and recognising that

farmers are able to design, conduct, and evaluate their own experiments.

- Encourage organisational changes, with a reorientation of government and university staff, CBO and NGO workers, and trainers towards a culture of open learning, moving away from top-down standardisation of procedures.
- Assist with policy review, both within organisations and governments, through new, timely, and more accurate insights from field-level discussions and planning.

Despite these and other positive changes, there remain many questions about the use of PRA. What has become clear is that the use of participatory methods alone does not guarantee participation in setting development agendas. Nor does it necessarily lead to empowerment, despite the claims sometimes made. Ironically, what grew out of a disillusionment with blueprint planning, and stressed flexibility and adaptive learning, is now in danger of being stifled again. In some settings, routine and prescribed procedures have begun to displace adaptation, innovation, and open-ended curiosity.

Some of the key areas of concern identified by PRA trainers and practitioners were expressed in *Sharing Our Concerns* (see *PLA Notes 22*). These included:

- the assumption that using PRA methods and/or approach in itself brings about positive change;
- lack of conceptual clarity, transparency and accountability;
- emphasis on information extraction with the rhetoric of political correctness;
- unchallenged assumptions of community harmony;

- lack of in-depth analysis which obscures awareness of political realities within communities;
- one-off training, with no follow-up by trainers or institutions;
- poor integration of PRA into project planning and implementation;
- lack of clarity about reasons for using PRA;
- agendas driven from outside the community, not from within; and,
- co-option of the acronym, making it a label without substance.

This issue of *PLA Notes* is devoted to much needed debate about these concerns. We bring together social anthropologists, policy makers, NGO development workers, economists, ecologists and trainers to reflect critically on the practice of PRA. The issue is divided into two sections. The first focuses on *PRA and Social Anthropology* while the second deals with *Politics and Practicalities*. The debates are complex, the perspectives varied, the issues immense. These diverse, and sometimes conflicting views are all also challenges, urging us to improve on what PRA has offered to date.

### • **Shared concerns, different perspectives**

Reactions to PRA are rarely neutral. It is either glorified or vilified. Debates about PRA span a wide range of perspectives. How people assess PRA depends on their perceptions of the purpose of PRA and on where they stand in development debates in general. Their views stem in turn from their own experience and training.

A first step in understanding the range of concerns is to look at who is saying what. Lines are often drawn between academics and practitioners. This issue of *PLA Notes* challenges these divisions. We bring together practitioners and academics who work with and within NGOs, donor agencies, and university departments, with shared concerns about poverty and powerlessness but different views on PRA as practice.

Much of the debate focuses on the kind of knowledge that PRA generates and the ways it

is used. For some, the practice of PRA has come to represent superficial pseudo-science, a poor replacement for the 'real thing'. For others, PRA offers an exciting new approach that challenges conventional hierarchies by creating opportunities for people themselves to analyse and plan. Some see PRA as a cost-effective strategy for enhancing operational effectiveness. Others raise concerns about the use of PRA to co-opt people into projects devised by outsiders to serve their interests, without altering the balance of power. Many practitioners have come to PRA in search of a people-centred alternative to conventional practice.

These different perspectives partly stem from the history of PRA and its relatively recent debut. PRA is sometimes represented as a fusion of the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) with the methods of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA). The awkward relationship between these two quite distinct approaches has given rise to a range of interpretations.

Participatory Research developed during the 1970s with the radical goal of empowering people to fight oppression and claim the choices that were denied them. RRA arose in the early 1980s and aimed to improve the effectiveness of development planning and management. It grew from a "*managerial need to compress and rationalise learning*" (Mosse, this issue).

PRA was developed in the late 1980s by those seeking to use RRA for a different, people-centred approach to development research and planning. Two insights were of particular importance: (1) that local people are able to represent and analyse information about their own livelihoods and make their own plans, a process that was enhanced by the use of group-based visual analysis; (2) that this learning process can motivate the people involved, researchers, development workers and local people, to behave differently and undertake different kinds of action. By the early 1990s, it became apparent that this process can only happen through critical self-reflection on personal behaviour and attitudes.

PRA aimed to shift the focus to enhancing the capacity of local people to do it themselves.

Yet while its forerunner, Participatory Research, has explicitly sought wider societal change, the use of PRA has often remained locked into the contexts in which RRA was previously used. Its application has remained largely sector-focused and so fits within the existing hierarchy of planning, without seeming to challenge it.

Today people often use PRA as an umbrella term for a wide variety of applications. It is common to find development agencies, keen to put local people's empowerment on their agendas, using the label PRA while actually only using some diagramming methods to improve data collection. This is in essence RRA, as local people do not take part in setting priorities and determining how subsequent action may be taken. As long as barriers to change remain unaddressed in many institutional settings, the scope of participatory development work will continue to be limited (Guèye, this issue).

Views on PRA are, therefore, influenced by how people come to use it, be it primarily via the political agenda of Participatory Research or the practical agenda of RRA. PRA can serve as a means to a range of ends, depending on how practitioners define their purpose and according to what they mean by 'participation'.

- **Critical concerns**

*Lack of a clear definition* of PRA lies at the heart of many of the critical reflections in this *PLA Notes*. PRA has variously been described as an approach, a process, a methodology, an activity, a technique, a basket of tools, or a menu of methods. It is usually seen as a series of group sessions in public spaces, which may or may not involve separate activities with different interest groups and with individuals.

The uneven transition from RRA to PRA is further complicated by the adoption of the term 'participatory' as a fundable buzz word to cover all applications. In some cases, PRA has simply become the latest term to refer to any activity which brings people together for discussion. Even questionnaire-based work has been passed off under the label of PRA.

Is there and should there be a single definition of PRA? Such a question highlights a paradox. If PRA is intended to be a flexible, adaptive approach to learning and action, then static definitions which systematise its use may lead us back into the very situation that PRA arose in reaction to: established dogma and routinised practice. Definitions often boil down to questions of method, rather than methodology. One of the key strengths of PRA lies in the possibilities it offers for trying out new ways of doing things, adapting methods to new contexts. The principle of creative innovation is underpinned by commitment to principles of equity and empowerment, and to enabling people to express themselves in their own terms. Instead of struggling to agree on what PRA is, more of a focus is needed on how and for what or whom PRA is used.

Confusion over definitions is directly related to *confusion over objectives*. RRA and PRA rely on similar methods, but are generally used to pursue different objectives. RRA offers planners, researchers and project staff the tools with which to gain an understanding of local conditions, so as to feed these insights into programming or policy. At the local level, participants may play an active role in the collection and analysis of information. But agendas continue to be set elsewhere, offering local people limited opportunities to take part in decision-making and planning for themselves. With PRA, the emphasis is not only on local-level analysis by local people themselves, but also on enabling people to set their own agendas, pursue their own priorities and play a more prominent part in decision-making.

In practice, many applications lie somewhere between PRA and RRA, often through institutional constraints (Gosling, Mosse, this issue). Although the aim may be to use PRA for local-level planning and empowerment, the demand for data for internal, agency-level planning often takes precedence. Problems arise where this process is labelled 'PRA', as assumptions are then made about empowerment.

Arising as it does in part from RRA, PRA lives with the legacy of being associated with rapid data collection. And it is often still used in this way. But rather than condemning RRA, it is

vital to return to questions of purpose. Policy change may require strategies that appear 'extractive', but can ultimately bring wider benefits. And rapid data collection can be a stepping stone to more engaged work at the community level.

Different situations require different mechanisms at various stages for involving local people in the development process. Longer-term engagement involves shifts between different modes of participation, from structured processes that bring people together to collect information, to bargaining, negotiation and mediation as interests and conflicts emerge and as spaces are created for collective action (Shah and Kaul Shah, Mosse, this issue). 'Non-participatory' research may be required to assess the impact of participatory work, or to establish the conditions under which such work could have the greatest positive impact (Mosse, this issue).

Confusion over definitions, principles, and objectives has led to an *overemphasis on the importance of methods* (Guèye, Richards, Scoones, this issue). Guides, handbooks, manuals and resource books are mushrooming, fostering a Manual Mentality. While manuals themselves play an important role in learning and spreading good practice, they may lead to the mechanical, formula-like use of a standardised series of methods. In such cases, inadequate attention is paid to the process and to the implications of their use in different cultural settings (Robinson-Pant, Richards, this issue). Part of the problem lies in the kind of training that is delivered (Chambers, this issue) and in the assumption that training is the answer (Scoones, this issue).

Learning to use the methods is the easy part. Acquiring the skills of communication and facilitation with which to apply them is far harder. Exposure to PRA involves a learning process that is deeply challenging, on a professional and personal level (Shah and Kaul Shah, this issue). Many of those who are now being trained in PRA have spent much of their working lives in settings with rigid hierarchies. Participatory approaches to research and development actively challenge these boundaries and may be perceived by some as a threat to their status and even their job. As

many PRA trainers can testify, resistance often arises in training sessions as participants try to adapt to these new roles.

Even where participants begin to work in more interactive ways with local people, a preoccupation with methods and their immediate results (diagrams, reports, research agendas, plans) has led to a neglect of the contexts and interactions that give rise to these outputs. In many cases, the methods of PRA continue to be used to seek facts rather than to explore perspectives. Information is taken out of the complex social and micro-political contexts in which it arose. Different people, in different settings, may choose to represent their situations to facilitators and each other in different ways. A major challenge for trainees and practitioners is to try to understand this context better and to see that such social interactions are *part* of the 'data', and indeed influence what is and is not said (Cornwall and Fleming, this issue). Training needs to concentrate more on developing skills of observation and analysis, and on enhancing practitioners' and researchers' abilities to reflect on their own personal biases in order to recognise the influence they themselves have on outcomes (Cornwall and Fleming, Hinton, Mosse, this issue).

While PRA may have 'pilfered' from anthropology (Scoones, this issue), practitioners often lack the conceptual tools to make sense of the complex social and political contexts in which participatory research and development takes place (Richards, Mosse, Cornwall and Fleming). How can PRA be used to understand the complex social relationships which determine who is and is not present, and who does and does not speak up in community gatherings (Mosse, this issue)?

These issues raise further questions about the role of professionals in participatory development. Professionals cannot deliver empowerment. But they can create opportunities for people to empower themselves. Knowing what professionals bring to a PRA-based process (such as resources, long-term support, links with other organisations, and skills to resolve conflicts) can help communities change their expectations of such professionals and

establish the basis for partnership in local development.

This brings us to the sensitive area of *political positioning in participatory research and planning*. The practice of PRA is never neutral. Outcomes generate ideas and expectations, which agencies and individuals may be unable to meet (Gosling, Schreckenberg, this issue). Choices need to be made and sides taken, raising ethical and political dilemmas. If consensus is sought, whose interests are served and whose voices are heard (Pottier and Orone, Richards, this issue)?

Local political structures may, in themselves, prove to be the biggest obstacle for the empowerment of marginalised groups (Mosse, this issue). And when choices are made to work with the less powerful, what repercussions might this involve (Shah and Kaul Shah, de Koning, Appleton, this issue)? Are practitioners equipped to deal with some of the conflicts that PRA may expose or provoke (Shah and Kaul Shah, Appleton, Schreckenberg this issue)?

Shah and Kaul Shah make the important point that bringing about change requires not only sustained interaction but the willingness to take risks that may generate conflict. They note that often such risks are minimised where they might jeopardise the short-term goals of development institutions, resulting in the use of PRA for limited ends and little in the way of longer-term institutional change.

The politics of practice raise wider ethical questions about *the impact of PRA*. Concerns have been raised about the use of villagers as guinea pigs to change the attitudes of bureaucrats or to sensitise a research team. Local people may invest hours and days in a process that can leave them with high expectations. If this is not followed up, it can lead to disillusionment and anger. Yet often, the time and energy that people expend on PRA activities are taken for granted and the costs they incur underestimated.

While there is no lack of reports of short-term outputs, there is still little documentation of what takes place in the longer term. As Shah and Kaul Shah point out, much of what is

written about PRA is the result of one-off or short-term assignments rather than reflections on intensive engagement with communities over time. In order to improve our practice, we need detailed accounts of the complex processes that take place in longer-term PRA-based work. The scarcity of such studies creates doubt about the effectiveness of participatory development work in achieving equity and empowerment (Richards, this issue).

In assessing the impact of PRA we need to look beyond whether or not it has produced more efficient programmes or enabled agencies to meet their objectives better. We might ask, with Richards, what perceptions participants themselves have of the purpose of PRA-based work. What impact do they feel it has had on the quality of their lives? What do they feel that they have gained from it? And what indicators would they themselves choose to assess changes?

The use of PRA is expanding on a vast scale (Chambers, this issue). While PRA is still regarded by some as a universal panacea for all development woes, others are addressing *questions of complementarity* with other methods and approaches. In some settings and for some purposes, conventional research methods may be more appropriate<sup>2</sup> (Schreckenberg, this issue). In others, PRA may be complemented by other approaches. Exploratory work using PRA may, for example, generate issues that require further investigation using conventional methods. For example, farmers may request the assistance of vets to diagnose and treat an epidemic in livestock. Or participant observation may be used to establish the basis for and to inform participatory work (Mosse, Hinton this issue). Ultimately, participation rests on questions about who sets the agenda and controls the process. As part of a process led and managed by local people, 'non-participatory' methods can complement PRA as means to ends defined by local people's priorities.

Issues of complementarity, then, bring us back to ends and means and raise further *questions about appropriateness*. Originally intended for and developed around micro-scale use at the community level, recent attempts to scale up and institutionalise PRA in large bureaucratic

structures raise new issues (Backhaus and Wagachchi, Chambers, Guèye, this issue). The expansion of PRA training on a massive scale also raises pressing concerns (Chambers, this issue). Have those embarking on the introduction of PRA assessed the suitability of the institutional set-up for the slow process of decentralised, bottom-up planning?

How appropriate is PRA for macro-level planning or extensive micro-level planning? And what might be the consequences for flexibility and innovation? How can micro-level PRA processes feed into macro-level policy making? Can communities use PRA to negotiate with local government and other institutions? The mechanisms involved are relatively unexplored, yet vitally important (Johnson, this issue).

### • **Challenges**

We have come full circle. PRA started as a critical response to the inadequacy of existing research and planning processes. Yet many of the concerns discussed here focus precisely on the inadequacy of local participation in the process. At its worst, the label 'PRA' has been used to describe forms of development that are little more than thinly veiled manipulation. But in other cases, the process itself has brought about tangible changes that open up opportunities for further, more extensive transformation. While institutional agendas often continue to determine how PRA is used, in some settings processes of institutional learning are taking place with far-reaching consequences.

PRA has made impressive gains and offers vast potential to contribute to sustained and positive change. If the potential of PRA is to be realised further, the concerns we raise here must be addressed. Facilitating and enhancing such change requires above all a new look at the original principles of PRA and a renewed commitment to them. By describing what we do, and not claiming to do what we do not or cannot do, much of the confusion can be avoided. By reflecting critically on what we do, we can learn from our mistakes and move forward. And by creating spaces to understand these issues better we may, perhaps, even find some answers.

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#### NOTE

1. With many thanks to Tony Bebbington, Robert Chambers, Izabella Koziell, James Mayers, Diana Mitlin, and Jules Pretty for their critical comments on an earlier version.
2. We plan to publish a semi-focus issue of PLA Notes on the complementarity of PRA with other research and planning methodologies.

We welcome your reactions to the debates addressed in this issue of PLA Notes. Please write to us with your experiences and views. We hope to continue with the debate in future issues.