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Context and complexity: anthropological reflections on PRA

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• Introduction

The use and abuse of RRA and PRA has attracted considerable criticism from social anthropologists. This section addresses some of the wider concerns that have been voiced about the practice of PRA, by practitioners and by academics working in development settings. The critical reflections offered by contributors to this section highlight issues of social and cultural complexity, difference and power, raising important challenges for practice¹.

• Questions of practice

Is PRA a genuine alternative to the use of 'expert' anthropologists as brokers of cultures and self-appointed representatives of 'local people'? Or is it merely "*quick and dirty*" anthropology on economists' terms' (Richards, this issue), a poor substitute for in-depth social analysis? Anthropologists have often been dismissive about PRA, viewing it as a hasty, superficial, approach; as 'short-cut' social science. Yet increasing numbers of applied anthropologists are using participatory approaches in their work. For them, as for many of those in mainstream development who have come to use it, PRA offers something new and different.

What *is* new and different about PRA? Two crucial distinctions need to be drawn in order to address this question. One is between the techniques and the approach itself. The other is between how something is done and what the underlying purpose is, between means and ends (Nelson and Wright, 1994). One

anthropologist mused, "*I suppose PRA is what we do anyway.*"

It's just quicker". Many of the *methods* used in PRA are not new and anthropologists have long used similar techniques (Richards, Scoones, this issue). But their use with and by local people to facilitate their own analyses, generate their own solutions and plan for themselves offers a significantly different *approach* to their use by anthropologists.

Conventionally, the observations, analyses and conclusions of the anthropologist form the substance and outcome of anthropological research. Anthropologists make fieldnotes and take them away to analyse. They may use some of the methods now familiar in PRA, such as ranking. But rarely are people in the communities where the conventional anthropologist works given the opportunity to take part in representing and analysing their own situations. More rarely still are outputs shared or discussed with them.

PRA offers practitioners a different role, as facilitators of processes in which local people play a far more active role. Rather than treating people as the objects of study, the use of PRA enables them to take part in presenting their own information, drawing their own conclusions and offering their own analyses. As such, PRA can open up areas that were once the domain of external 'expert' anthropologists. But, as we go on to suggest, there are often shortcomings in terms of analysis. This is an area in which anthropologists have most to offer.

The crucial difference, then, lies not in techniques nor in the contexts in which they

are used. Rather, questions of practice arise from and return to questions of purpose. What ends are sought by researchers? For what and for whom are the outcomes of research intended? And by whom should it be carried out?

• **Competition or complementarity?**

If, as many PRA practitioners contend, "*local people can do it themselves*", where does this leave the development anthropologist who is committed to action? Concerns about substitution are increasingly relevant (Richards, this issue). Used to generate 'short-cut' outcomes, PRA is no substitute for in-depth analysis. Yet again the question arises: analysis for and by whom? As Mosse points out, many development projects view long-term research as an unaffordable luxury. But understanding complex situations and facilitating real change 'from the bottom up' takes time, commitment and a longer-term engagement. Richards rightly identifies the attempt by donors to squeeze social analysis into tight schedules as part of the problem.

Perhaps part of the solution lies in exploring complementarities between anthropology and PRA as a longer-term process of action research. Internal critiques in anthropology have challenged the authority of anthropologists to speak for others. PRA offers development anthropologists ways to seek a different kind of engagement with local communities. Rather than displacing anthropologists, the practice of PRA can be enriched by their involvement at many levels, from critical reflections on methodology to facilitators of analysis (Mosse, Hinton, Scoones, this issue).

Locating social knowledge

A basic starting point for social anthropology has been to question assumptions about what people say or do. This has involved trying to understand local realities in local terms. It also means looking beyond people's public statements, to their actual practices, and the social context in which these statements and practices occur. PRA has drawn on anthropology to emphasise the importance of

local categories and classifications, the use of local materials and symbols, and the need to adapt methods to different cultural settings. However, analysis of the contexts in which PRA is practised is often weak. The mechanistic use of methods may produce 'data'. But this information, and its analysis, can be misleading without a sensitivity to how social interactions and settings shape the outcomes of PRA activities (Pottier and Orone, Hinton, Mosse, this issue).

The contributors to this section underscore the importance of understanding how social knowledge is created and used in PRA. One of the key strengths of PRA is the use of visualisation, as a means of communicating information and creating arenas for discussion and analysis. Diagramming can help to challenge ideas that are taken for granted. But visual representations, like the verbal discussions through which people interpret and analyse them, are never neutral (Mosse, Richards, Robinson-Pant, this issue). They cannot be simply read as 'facts'. What people think the purpose of a particular PRA exercise is, who is there and who takes part in it, where it takes place and what people perceive the potential outcome to be, all influence what participants choose to represent in diagrams. Taken out of context, diagrams can be interpreted in a range of different ways and can potentially lead to misleading conclusions (Richards, Robinson-Pant, this issue).

Although visualisation can give people greater scope to represent their own perceptions and priorities, some of the techniques, such as matrix scoring or Venn diagramming, transfer models that have been developed in particular cultural settings to others. While these techniques can have universal application for structuring discussion, if they are used only to generate products, rather than to stimulate analysis and debate, the form may in itself impose meaning. And although diagramming methods create spaces for people to participate in presenting information about their lives, the processes in which methods are used are not always in themselves 'empowering'. Robinson-Pant (this issue) draws on anthropological studies of literacy to consider the implications of PRA as a 'new literacy practice'. As with literacy, the techniques can be merely treated as tools that 'work' in any

context to generate or convey information. However, processes that facilitate critical awareness require more than simply applying methods (de Koning, Robinson-Pant, this issue). Whether or not the use of PRA enables people to empower themselves depends more on the process and style of facilitation than on the methods themselves (Guijt and Cornwall, this issue).

Understanding social processes and interactions may appear to be an academic exercise that detracts from the real business of getting things done. But the importance of such an understanding is still underestimated. Mosse and Hinton show how the skills of participant observation and social analysis can be used effectively in PRA work to extend understanding of the social relationships between people and to set their interactions in context. These skills are increasingly relevant. But they are not exclusive to anthropologists. Greater sensitivity to process and context can be developed by improving the capacity of fieldworkers to observe, analyse and record the interactions that take place, as Hinton and Mosse show. Good practice demands that more attention is paid to building these skills.

• **Developing reflexivity**

Reporting on PRA-based work tends to focus on products. Few reports offer insights into the processes or the contexts in which diagrams and analyses were produced (de Koning, this issue). While PRA training has increasingly addressed attitudes and behaviour, the emphasis has tended to be on conduct and awareness of personal social biases. Less attention has been paid to how the practitioner's presence and their own ideas about what counts as knowledge influence the kinds of information produced in PRA exercises.

For anthropologists, reflexivity is about critical self-awareness; about the recognition that who we are as people and as political actors defines not only what we think is important but also our interactions with others. Encouraging reflection on processes and self-criticism through PRA training and practice is crucial. Opportunities need to be made to find out and raise questions about what people think

'development', 'participation' and 'empowerment' mean, and to create a culture of self-criticism among PRA practitioners.

But learning to 'embrace error' is not easy. Many people find it hard to admit mistakes, especially if it could threaten their employment and funding. The challenge of enabling the poorest to determine their own priorities and solutions can be deeply threatening, personally and professionally. The managerial skills needed to support this process are often overlooked, but are vitally important (Meera Kaul Shah, pers. comm.). It is easier to simply slot methods into routine procedures, treating them merely as means to ends that avoid the risk of challenging established interests (de Koning, this issue). These factors limit opportunities for institutional change, at any level (Shah and Kaul Shah, Guijt and Cornwall, this issue).

• **Exploring complexity**

One of the biggest challenges for practice in participatory development is to move beyond simplistic notions of 'the community' to address the social and political complexities of participation. Without an understanding of local social, cultural and political contexts, possibilities for genuine participatory action may be limited (Mosse, Richards, this issue). While analysis can lead to suggestions for action, action itself is always mediated by the social relationships between those who take part (Mosse, Shah and Kaul Shah, this issue).

Interpretations of what 'participation' actually involves can vary according to the way people make sense of social processes, as well as the local political contexts in which activities take place (Pottier and Orone, Richards, this issue). Local social theories can provide additional complexities for analysis, as participants and facilitators may have quite a different interpretation of the object of the exercise (Richards, this issue).

PRA is weak on appropriate methods for exploring social complexity (Mosse, Richards, Scoones, Pottier and Orone, this issue). It may be the case that to situate PRA in a wider social and political context requires not only better methods (Scoones, this issue), but also

'non-participatory' ethnographic studies of the complex processes involved at every stage (Mosse, Richards, this issue).

Social anthropologists could play an important part in developing a critical understanding of the impact of PRA at the local level. Little work has been done to explore how local people view PRA. And even less is understood about what takes place in longer-term PRA-based work within communities. As PRA comes to assume a more central place within participatory development work, these issues are crucial for future developments in practice.

• **In whose interests?**

Much, but by no means all, PRA-based work aims to facilitate 'community participation'. But who are 'the community'? Whose realities are being represented? And how, without an understanding of social context, are PRA practitioners to know whose interests lie behind the 'community concerns' that are presented in public discussions (Pottier and Orone, this issue)?

Many practitioners of PRA assume that consensus is possible and/or desirable. Yet to take at face value the consensus that is created at the end of a short appraisal can potentially undermine the strategies of the least powerful. Even if people are given opportunities to speak, procedures may exist that favour the almost inevitable co-option of the process in the interests of the powerful (Richards, Mosse, Hinton, this issue). Can the practice of PRA ever take place outside local power structures? Conflicts between the various actors involved in PRA activities raise a number of dilemmas (Pottier and Orone, Appleton, Shah and Kaul Shah, this issue). Working towards equity and the empowerment of marginalised groups is a process that can generate, as well as expose, conflict. Conflicts may surface in different ways as the process moves from one stage to the next and every situation offers new complexities. One-off, extractive applications often ride roughshod over these issues, taking apparent compliance as consensus; and ignoring the relationships between the different actors involved. Without an understanding of the context and a commitment to longer-term, intensive,

engagement little meaningful change is possible (Guijt and Cornwall, Shah and Kaul Shah, this issue).

This raises wider political questions about whose interests the use of PRA serves. Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been used since the 1970s without attracting a similar level of interest and excitement (de Koning, this issue), perhaps precisely because it is directly concerned with wider political change. In the face of the extensive and rapid 'scaling up' of the use of PRA (Chambers, this issue), it may be appropriate to ask what the different actors and agencies involved in development mean by 'participation' and 'empowerment'.

PRA is rapidly becoming bureaucratized and routinized. This raises very real concerns about integrity. It also leads to questions about the compatibility of an 'empowering' approach with the agendas of some of the institutions and individuals that use it. PRA may offer tools for transformation, but as applications multiply the potential for manipulation and tokenism becomes ever more apparent. As reports of bad practice proliferate, questions need to be asked about whether the kinds of applications labelled as 'PRA' really increase the capacity of the poor to act in their own interest (Richards, de Koning, this issue). And, as Shah and Kaul Shah argue, using PRA in short-term excursions runs the risk not only of being counter-productive in the longer-term, but also of undermining the development of good practice.

• **Conclusion**

The issues raised here are critical. If PRA as a longer-term process of empowerment is to have a meaningful influence on mainstream development practice, radical institutional, personal and professional changes are necessary. Re-emphasising the 'P' in PRA and breaking free from the traps of dogma, orthodoxy and empty rhetoric requires renewed commitment to the basic principles with which the approach originated. This is a process to which anthropologists have much to contribute, as well as to learn. Anthropological concerns with reflexivity, social processes and context can help inform the practice of PRA

and enable practitioners to appreciate the complex realities of the urban and rural poor. The challenges PRA raises for anthropology take critiques from within the discipline further, opening up new possibilities for development anthropology (Hinton, Scoones, this issue).

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