

## 3

## PRA and anthropology: challenges and dilemmas

Ian Scoones

### • Introduction

These reflections consist of two parts. The first explores the myths surrounding Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). These are myths propagated by development practitioners, donors, and academics alike. I attempt to debunk some of them, drawing on my experience (and interpretation) of what PRA is and isn't. These reflections draw heavily on discussions held amongst an international group of PRA practitioners/trainers at the IIED-IDS seminar held in Brighton in May 1994 (see *Sharing our concerns - looking to the future*, PLA Notes 22) and debates generated by the IIED *Beyond Farmer First* research programme and workshop.

The second part of this note picks up on some of these issues and asks: How can PRA and anthropology interact? How can different challenges and needs be met? How can PRA and anthropology 'become friends'?

### • Ten myths about PRA

#### 1. That it's quick

While many of the methods associated with PRA may be relatively cost-effective in encouraging dialogue, joint analysis and learning, the processes of participatory development are slow and difficult.

#### 2. That it's easy

PRA methods are appealingly simple. This is partly why they have attracted so much attention. They are useful for many people, from villagers to field practitioners to academics. But even experienced PRA practitioners know that the successful use of the approach requires many other skills, especially in communication,

facilitation and conflict negotiation.

#### 3. That anyone can do it

Anyone can help make a map or do matrix scoring with some success. But this does not mean that learning takes place or changes occur. Using the language of participation, as many consultancy groups and large aid bureaucracies do, does not mean that fieldwork will be successful. Wider issues of organisational change, management and reward systems, staff behaviour, ethics and responsibilities also have to be addressed.

#### 4. That it's just fancy methods

The popular and visible image of PRA is the array of methods that have emerged over the past decade. These have proved effective and widely applicable. However, methods are only part of a wider shift being seen within both government and non-government development agencies. This has deeper implications than the adoption of particular methods. In addition to the use of participatory methods, conditions for success seem to include an open learning environment within organisations, and institutional policies, procedures and cultures that encourage innovation.

#### 5. That it's based on particular disciplinary perspectives

PRA has not grown out of the universities and academic departments, but out of practical experiences in the field. The main innovators have been field workers based in the South (but also increasingly in the North). PRA has drawn on and combined elements from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The lack of a conventional disciplinary focus has been considered unrigorous and unpublishable, and the experimental and interactive nature of PRA has been sensed as threatening by some academics. While students increasingly seek to

use PRA methods, teaching professionals sometimes resist. Universities have been the last to take up PRA approaches in their courses.

#### **6. That it has no theoretical basis**

PRA is usually associated very much with practical situations and with people engaged in practical development activities. But this does not mean that it is without a rich theoretical basis. PRA is based on an action-research approach, in which theory and practice are constantly challenged through experience, reflection and learning. The valuing of theory over practice in most academic disciplines means that practice-oriented PRA approaches are often not taken seriously. Yet recent theoretical work shows that participatory approaches address important issues in social science debates (Scoones and Thompson, 1994).

#### **7. That it's just old wine in new bottles**

PRA has evolved and continues to do so. It's not a magical package that has suddenly appeared from nowhere. As with all major shifts in thinking and practice, PRA unites wide-ranging debates and practices in a novel manner. Its emphasis on visualisation and improvisation contrasts with other approaches using pre-determined diagrams mechanically. Its focus on attitudes and behaviour of external agents contrasts with approaches that disregard this key aspect of local interaction. The extensive range of applications in research and planning on, for example, land tenure, HIV, urban planning, natural resource management and domestic violence, and subsequent sharing of experiences enriches methodological development. It has proven adaptable to diverse contexts, and accessible and acceptable to a wide range of development professionals.

#### **8. That training is the answer**

One common response to 'new' ideas is to train everyone in their use. The demand for training in PRA is phenomenal. This carries several risks. First, inexperienced trainers are threatening the quality of training and subsequent practice. Second, a training course alone will not ensure appropriate follow-up. Too often, organisations have not explored the implications for themselves in terms of support after the training. Successful training requires encouraging new ways of learning within

organisations. Training courses are only part of the answer.

#### **9. That people involved are neutral**

The myth of the neutral, detached, observing researcher or practitioner is incorrect. People are never neutral, whether they are village participants or external agents. Everyone is unavoidably a participant in some way or other, and these roles and implications need to be understood. This will affect the information gathered and the analyses carried out. In participatory development, everyone is responsible for his or her actions. The political and ethical implications of PRA must therefore be discussed openly and responded to.

#### **10. That it's not political**

The actions of people engaged in participatory research or development have consequences which are in a broad sense political. Power, control, and authority are all part of participatory processes. Conflicts, disputes and tensions may be raised when becoming involved in such a process. Ignoring this is dangerous. Everyone should be aware of the issues of power and control, conflict and dispute that are part of an action-research approach to development. All participants must learn and be ready to deal with these issues. This may mean taking sides or taking a mediating or negotiating role, which are all political acts.

#### **• PRA and anthropology: why they should be friends**

##### **What PRA can offer anthropology**

Anthropology appears (from an outsiders' perspective at least..) strong on theory but weak on methods. One social anthropology lecturer once said to me "*anthropology does not need methods, it needs theory*". When asked about training for fieldwork he said: "*All I tell my students is that they should go to the field and be polite*". The apparent lack of discussion of what to do once you get to the field (except participant observe, politely) seems unfortunate considering the wealth of methods that could be added to the anthropologists' kit bag, potentially enriching long term fieldwork immensely. PRA methods may be very important in this respect. Judging

by the positive response of students to short courses on PRA run in anthropology departments, it should not be difficult to enrich anthropological fieldwork in this way.

PRA approaches may also offer something to the vexed question of what anthropologists should do outside academia. It is clear that not all anthropology graduates can be employed by the universities (nor do they all want to be). But applied/development anthropology appears to have a slightly dirty feel to the purists within academe, making it difficult for students to 'admit' to a desire to contribute to the practical issues of development.

Unfortunately, the disdain towards the applied is reinforced by the usual role for anthropologists (and other 'soft' social scientists) in development work. Their job is often to come in late during evaluation missions in an 'expert' role to attempt to pick up the pieces of yet another development failure. This is both depressing and wasteful of skills.

One debate (eg. within ODA and the World Bank) is on how anthropologists can contribute (subtext: quickly and cheaply) to conventional development processes. How can the participant observation process be compressed to give useful information? To me this debate appears to miss the point. Why should the anthropologist be just another of the horde of external experts with a particular disciplinary skill? Instead, anthropologists ought to be equipped to facilitate and catalyse PRA approaches run by local people (not outsider experts) and to encourage learning and change (ie. development).

In addition, the reflective, analytical and theoretical/philosophical foundations of the discipline should provide the ideal basis for challenging the type of prevalent myths outlined above in a constructive and positive manner to the benefit of all. Instead of disengaging from the PRA debate (or providing the safe, carping critique from outside), anthropologists should be engaging, learning, innovating and critiquing from within (see this issue).

## **What anthropology can offer PRA**

Anthropology is good at understanding contexts, the roles of actors and the micro-politics of development action. All of these issues are essential elements of understanding for action research. The challenging, reflective attention to detail and dynamics are all qualities that should enhance PRA practice at all levels. Sadly much of the debate around such issues is deeply shrouded in exclusive, academic language. The discipline appears to become more and more impenetrable to the adventurous outsider.

This is not to say that theoretical and philosophical understandings are unimportant. If expressed in accessible language, they can be vital in the continuous testing of the praxis of action-research and PRA. Ongoing theoretical debates about the contested nature of knowledge, about expression of identities, about performance and about language and meaning are all highly significant in applied development work. Each provide insight and challenges to the myths outlined above. Again, the plea is to drop the arcane language and come out into the open!

While some claim that anthropology is not about methods (see above), there are clearly many important methodological contributions derived from anthropological work. For instance, the network analysis work by Mitchell in Zambia (from the Manchester School of anthropologists working with the Rhodes Livingstone Institute in Lusaka) comes to mind. Today it may look horribly functionalist and not very participatory, but it nevertheless remains something to be built on rather than discarded as passé. Similarly, discussions of performance and the methodological implications of various forms of (non-)discursive behaviour is another relevant issue for the visualisation and role play approaches to PRA. The list could go on.

## **• Conclusion**

PRA needs anthropology to continue the process of reflection, self-critique and theoretical and methodological enrichment. An aloof disengagement or a negative critique of poor practice does not contribute to new

learning and change for anyone. In the same way anthropology needs an applied context to work effectively and make the most of the discipline's insights. Is not engagement with the more radical approaches to participatory development another route for applied anthropology?

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NOTE

This article was written as a summary overview piece for the workshop on PRA and Anthropology held in Manchester in July 1994 (see note on page 12 in this issue).

REFERENCE

Scoones, I. and Thompson, J. 1994. Beyond Farmer First: Rural People's Knowledge, Agricultural Research and Development. IT Publications Ltd., London.