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# Participatory appraisal and education for empowerment?

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## • Introduction

PRA has much in common with Participatory Research (PR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR). The latter concepts were developed in the 1970s by pioneers such as Rajesh Tandon and Fernandes, Orlando Fals-Borda and Budd Hall, who highlighted the need to link research with empowering education and action. The common ground in PR and PRA is the concern with persistent inequalities in the distribution of power and resources and the development of a research and planning methodology which is more people-centred in its approach.

PRA would, in theory, enable the rural poor to influence the research agenda, thus leading to an increased capacity to act in their own interest (Richards, this issue). These intentions raise the question of whose interests we have in mind when we aim to enhance the ability of the poor to set their own priorities and act for themselves. Who are these 'poor people'? What part do PRA facilitators play in the process of empowerment in practice? This paper intends to trigger a discussion on the contribution and potential of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) to empowerment.

## • Educational processes and PRA

In the 1970s, Paulo Freire made an important contribution to the understanding of education by linking the process of knowing with the process of learning. Linking knowing and learning through an on-going cycle of action and reflection leads to the development of a critical

awareness about the world in which people live (Freire, 1972). Freire believes that most educational activities do not challenge inequalities in the learners' lives. This kills initiative, creativity and the belief and confidence in one's ability to think for oneself.

To improve their lives, people who have lived in marginalised positions need to develop a critical insight into the structures, ideas and practices in society and in themselves that place and keep them in positions of inequality. For example, in my experience, poor and illiterate people are often referred to in a negative way. People say of them: *"They don't know how to look after their children"*; *"They cannot organise their own lives"*; *"How can they hope to survive with so many children"* etc. Liberating educational processes enable people to become aware of where these images come from, the circumstances influencing their lives, and to give meaning to their individual and communal situation. They can then decide what action would be most important and feasible to take.

Challenging inequalities is a long-term process. For PRA to live up to its aims, it must be part of this longer term process and go beyond the moments of data collection, visual documentation and instant analysis. If we are to address inequalities we must aim for a continuing process of learning which integrates research, reflection and action.

### Shifts in practice

Freirian and other adult education approaches implemented by many NGOs in the 1970s began to lose their credibility by the 1980s. The 1980s saw a shift amongst donors towards short-term funding and the demand for quick results. With some exceptions, many donors

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began to lose interest in approaches to participatory development that emphasised empowerment, in favour of more predictable and measurable outcomes. Activists focused on immediate action and direct benefits to the groups with which they worked, rather than systematically keeping track of the process. The changes they brought about were also not easy to measure. Much of their work and successes has, therefore, remained undocumented. Conventional indicators offered little scope for assessing increases in self-esteem, self-confidence and critical awareness of the people activists worked among, nor in their capacity to act on and change their situations.

There was a growing realisation that individuals and groups are able to produce their own data in a way that is cost-effective and reliable. Both activists and donor agencies saw the value of Participatory Rural Appraisal when it developed in the late 1980s. Also, the methods used in PRA-based work have expanded the ability of many grassroots initiatives to trigger discussion with people about their situation and to document and recognise local knowledge and changes.

The emphasis on learning with and from local people in a relaxed and flexible way and the need to show respect for people and 'hand over the stick' are in line with the principles and ideas on which many activists based their work. The information and knowledge produced by the participants can help to enhance their self confidence in the value of their own insights. The visual presentations can also trigger a reflection process. Used in this way PRA methods can form part of an emancipatory learning environment.

However, to what extent are PRA methods, principles and procedures actually much used in this context of empowerment? Many documents on PRA focus on the methods, the findings they yield, and the short term process of how to facilitate their use. But where are the reports on what happens after the short period during which the PRA process is conducted? In what way does the use of PRA methods contribute to an improvement in people's circumstances?

PRA seems, in many cases, to be used in the same extractive ways as other forms of appraisals. Many practitioners, such as health professionals, agriculturalists, evaluators and researchers, who learn about the methods, have no background or training in empowering education processes. For example, mapping of health and demographic information by community members has become a common method in the field of health. However, it is rare for these maps to be used by the groups who produced them to discuss underlying factors that influence their health and lives, or to look at inequalities between families and between groups and what could be done about that.

The result is that the participatory methods themselves contribute very little to an emancipatory process. Unless PRA is explicitly linked with an educational process which enables groups of people with little power and resources to gain more control over their own lives, the term 'participatory' remains meaningless.

- **The issue of difference in PRA**

PRA aims to work with the poor in a way that will give them more power in influencing research agendas, the production of knowledge, and what happens in their lives. But who are 'the poor'? It is often up to individual facilitators to make sure that difference is addressed and that communities are not treated as if they are homogeneous. When looking at difference, one of the issues is whom is given a voice by being included as a participant, and whose ideas are informing the results.

The abstract use of categories such as 'the oppressed' or 'the poor' raises further questions about difference, both in terms of theory and in practice. Paulo Freire, like many other men writing about human experience in the sixties, failed to address the differences between and among groups of oppressed people. By treating 'the oppressed' as a single category, Freire suggested that the meaning of oppression and the paths towards liberation were the same for all oppressed people. His examples illustrate bosses oppressing workers, and men oppressing other men (Freire, 1972).

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But he failed to look at situations where, for example, men who are oppressed in the workplace or by being out of work, can take the role of oppressor of their wives and daughters in the home. In his later work he recognises and welcomes the influence of feminist theory (McLaren, 1993).

However, although the feminist movement has started to re-address the male bias in the selection of knowledge, many research projects continue to exclude women and their views (Maguire, 1987).

Many participatory research projects concerned with gender have addressed the issue of difference further, by challenging the use of women as a unified category. They show us that the meaning of being a woman differs depending on the specific place, situation and time. This also means that individual women need to exchange views and ideas, and to negotiate a shared course of action that has meaning in their specific situation (Box 1). Alice Welbourn shows how the use of different PRA methods enabled her and the participants to document and raise awareness about the different experiences, insights and ideas of individual and groups of women (Welbourn, 1992).

However, it is one thing to identify differences but another to deal with the conflicting interests that emerge. Most reports of PRA-based work provide little insight into how different interests are negotiated within the larger community. Obviously it is much more difficult for less influential groups to have their interests taken on board if these are in conflict with the interests of others. Worse still is when action is taken by a group which has not thought through the potential backlash (and if and how they can cope with that). This can be a disempowering experience which further reduces people's confidence in the possibility for change.

Strategic planning of action in participatory planning should, therefore, include the anticipation of possible reactions and how that will influence the development of a particular group. This is an essential part of enabling less powerful groups to act in their own interest (see Box 1).

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**BOX 1**
**WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA**

SARTHI (Social Action for Rural and Tribal Inhabitants of India) conducted work in Gujarat, India (Khanna, 1992) on women's health and empowerment. Women had shared secrets about their husbands' drinking and the subsequent wife beatings for years. However, the women decided not to lobby for the closure of the drinking houses because they felt they would be unable to cope with their husbands' reactions. Instead they concentrated on other, more acceptable, activities which helped to strengthen themselves. Actions which carried a substantial risk for a backlash would only be started after women, as a group, had carefully weighed up the possible public and private reactions and when they felt it was important for their own development to do so .

Source: Renu Khanna, pers. comm.

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The facilitator is responsible for enabling the group of participants to project and analyse carefully the effects of possible reactions to the action they propose, and to clarify their position in the suggested action. It is the group of participants who has to take the final decision.

## • Conclusions

PRA has much to offer by, at least, setting the process of empowerment into motion. The methods can create a feeling of achievement amongst participants, which in turn helps to enhance self-confidence and self-esteem. The visualisation methods are also helpful as a constant point of reference and are useful to trigger further discussions and reflection. The flexible, experimental style in which facilitators are encouraged to work provides scope for involving different groups and individuals which gives a greater change to clarify and document differences between and among groups.

However, there is a need in training and reporting on PRA, to pay more attention to:

- who formulates the questions and issues to be researched;
- what the role is of PRA, PRA facilitators, organisations and groups in the

community involved in ensuring an ongoing process of reflection and action; and,

- how to deal with conflicting interests and issues of power between and among groups.

Those using PRA must seek better ways for communities to reflect on shifting power relationships over time and to ensure that different perspectives and needs are not only heard and documented but are also taken into account.

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