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## PRA, social tremors and rolling heads: thoughts on PRA and empowerment

### Author Name

#### • How far should facilitators go?

Participation in social processes of analysis and planning can be an empowering experience, not only for the individuals and the community involved, but also a liberating if frequently tense experience for the facilitator. Communities are never socially and economically homogeneous, and most PRA exercises uncover conflicts of interest. Empowerment in such situations can reveal new and exciting avenues for development and change, out of which choices have to be made. The resolution of interests usually passes through tension on the way.

Empowerment also involves heightened exposure for individuals and communities to their social, political, and economic antagonists. This requires a sense of social responsibility on the part of the PRA facilitator. He or she must judge how much social danger is involved in this exposure, whether it can be used *constructively*, to improve livelihoods, or whether it should be avoided because it can be *destructive* of social relations and even of lives. The danger is that the PRA exercises will contribute to situations where social tensions are such that sanctions, censure and even physical threats are heightened, without any compensating positive change. A major preoccupation of PRA facilitators is thus how PRA-based work can also draw out the positive change in these situations.

A nutritionist colleague of mine in Guatemala still holds herself responsible for several violent deaths as a result of her over-zealous pursuit of 'Action-Reflection-Action' in the

1970s. Poor peasants had counted on her for protection against landowners when they protested against their feudal conditions, a protection she was unable to provide. In Honduras I myself had to withdraw from a discussion of land-occupation as a solution to hunger in Santa Barbara villages, pointing out that Save the Children Fund could not support nominally illegal activities, even though this might well be just, and certainly had potential for more local maize and bean production.

Being part of participatory discussions of what people perceive as crucial issues often presents facilitators with dilemmas about their own roles in social intervention. Are all PRA facilitators aware of this, and above all, experienced enough to know when to engage and when to withdraw?

The question of how far to go becomes particularly acute when working with representatives of a government which is seen by the people as "*the enemy*". The UN agencies by definition only work with and through governments. Consequently, prompting participatory approaches in an agency like the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) is not without its professional and political conundrums.

#### • PRA in FAO

FAO's (World Bank-funded) Investment Centre has made systematic use of RRA methods for some years in an attempt to reduce the amount of time and funds spent on country and project assessment. However, the *participatory* use of RRA methods, and participatory approaches to development work

in general have been promoted and used by individual FAO officers only in specific projects, mostly within forestry and fisheries. These individual initiatives are finally achieving recognition within the organisation, and training in participatory approaches for higher-level officers is in progress.

My own use of PRA in FAO fisheries projects illustrated how important it is that project staff involved in PRA have some social knowledge in addition to their technical expertise.

### **Food and credit in Kaback, Guinea**

An FAO project manager working in fisheries development off the coast of Guinea was concerned about the health of the local population. He was also concerned to encourage more democratic and participatory attitudes among his staff. We agreed to try and combine this with my own FAO task, which included improving food security in fishing communities, in an exploratory RRA exercise in the Kaback project.

Initially the four local staff members of varied backgrounds were sceptical, both of whether they could involve illiterate fisherpeople in any kind of study, and of their own ability to investigate food and eating without being experts

in nutrition. But by the time we got to Khunimodiya, they had relaxed into the process and had begun to enjoy seeing the different directions in which their discussions could go.

There we talked to a focus group of women fish-processors, wives of fishermen, who were keen to explain their food system. This involved some agriculture, including rice, fresh and smoked fish and items purchased with income from fish-smoking.

From their calendar (Table 1), constructed using pictures and heaps of small shells, it emerged that their major concern about food was not only getting enough rice to eat with their fish, but being able to eat their *own* rice, the taste of which they prefer. However, they could not store enough of their own rice each year as their husbands had to sell so much after the harvest to pay off fishing and household debts, a never-ending annual cycle. Enquiries elsewhere showed that this effect of the debt burden was general, with local variations, in all the fishing villages. Additionally, the calendar showed how irregular their own and household income was, compared to the very regular pay-back requirements of the project credit scheme. The Khunimodiya women presented the food and credit problems and their calendars at the team's final meeting. It was a revelation to the men and to the project staff how simply they could represent their cyclical economic difficulties, without having to write or

**Table 1. Khunimodiya women's calendar, showing the main elements of household budgets**

Season	mist & fog	hot & dry	early rains	rains	late rain	clear skies
Own Rice	..... .	..... ....	....	....		.....
Fish for Smoking	.....	.....	....	..... .....	..... ..	..... .....
Cash in	..... .....	..... .....	.....	..... .....	..... .....	..... .....
Cash out	.....	.....	.....	..... .....	..... .....	..... .....
	debt repayments			food debts		

even quantify them. Crucially, it clarified for the project credit officer why it was more difficult to get re-payment on loans at some times than others. In fact there had been some ill-feeling about this. On the eve of our arrival in the villages there had been turmoil when the credit officer posted photographs of the heads of those credit groups which had defaulted.

After the calendar presentations, the project management team sat down with community leaders and the few big farmers, with villager and project staff listening from a short distance, and discussed the feasibility of financing a physical rice-bank as an alternative or a supplement to arranging cash credits for rice sold outside the area. More importantly for household budgeting, and hopefully for food security, the credit officer toured the villages and drew similar locally detailed calendars with all the credit groups in order to adjust their re-payment periods to ease pressure during stress periods.

### **Credit and corruption in Kagera, Tanzania**

During the start-up phase of an FAO artisanal fisheries project on the western side of Lake Victoria, supporting commercial development by Tanzania's Fisheries Department of the Nile Perch and sardinella fisheries, I spent a month facilitating an exploratory appraisal. The focus was nutrition and food security in

the fishing communities. However, because fish is only a small part of local diets, it was important to encourage people to talk about the livelihoods that allow them access to staples (bananas, beans) and other food items.

In nearly every case these food-focused discussions led to three key preoccupations:

- the changing structure of small-scale fisheries;
- increasing domination by bigger fishermen with access to public and illegal funds; and,
- the concentration of the available credit in the hands of the better-off boatowners and government officials (how they saw the probable outcome of the FAO project).

The classification (Table 2) of fishermen and women emerged from focus group discussions with local fish-bosses, with men and women active in the boats and/or at the landings and processing sites, and with the pool of casual male and female labour. This classification also includes the land-based activities related to fishing, in which more women are engaged (processing, trading, servicing food/drink/other needs of the fishermen) and was accepted by all described in it.

**Table 2. A classification of men and women involved in the Kagera artisanal fishing industry**

Involvement in Fishing	Non-fishing work and Women
1. Big time boat-owners, with engines	No women
2. Owners of several boats, without engines	Only 2 women identified
3. Owners of one boat (no engine)	Small minority of women
4. Jobbing fishermen, with gear	Equivalent to women owning and running enterprises with fixed investment, like fish-smoking and bars
5. Jobbing fishermen, without gear	Equivalent to known traders, processors, transporters with only recurrent costs
6. Casual labour and drifters	Casual labour and 'tea room' and 'beer hall' sex workers

Disagreement focused on how many and which of the groups was entitled to cheap public/FAO credit. The appraisal work led to the further spreading of the loans, from current concentrations in categories 1 and 2, to cover categories 2, 4 and 5. However the fishermen feel strongly that only categories 3, 4 and 5 "need" loans.

As the research team became more experienced, and more interested in tensions they had previously felt but not understood, they uncovered layers of manipulation and corruption in the management of the credit team. Some involved officials of both the Fisheries Department and the credit agency (CRDB) selected by the FAO project to disburse funds. The heads of these local institutions were nominally part of the team but were always too busy to take part in field visits.

The corruption associated with credit came to a head on two occasions. One was in a village

where the new mayor and the villagers complained of being unable to access credit for either fishing or trading due to insufficient physical collateral. They also accused the former mayor and the local fisheries officer of charging such high illegal 'stamp duty' on their applications for small loans that it was not worth their while pursuing them.

Some muttered they would set the *sungu-sungu* (traditional vigilante) on the credit agency representative if he came to the village again (ie. lynch him). Meanwhile, they wanted to propose their own criteria for loan-worthiness to the FAO/Fisheries project, through a system of village council guarantees of known *bona fide* and hard-working fishermen and women processors and traders.

Corruption was also revealed when the team subsequently urged the expatriate and national project management to scrutinise the list of proposed recipients of project credit before it was made public, and take measures to ensure a fair distribution of loans among different types of fishing activities. This caught the project management in an awkward position, between the local establishment who accepted the corruption, and the official project clients, the fisher communities.

It was clear from the draft list that the villagers were right: three of the biggest loans were to go to officials not currently involved in fisheries, the only woman recipient proposed on the list was one of these officials, and none of the proposed loans were for fishermen who did not already own at least three boats and an outboard motor.

Local members of the team were nervous about taking the issue further, for fear of losing their jobs or other consequences. However, they felt it was such an important issue for local government as well as the fishing communities that they pursued it, but through one of their own 'outsiders', a temporary staff member seconded from Dar es Salaam. He made it clear to the project management that both FAO and the Fisheries Department would be totally discredited in the villages if the loan proposals went ahead.

The publication of the project loans was postponed. As I left Bukoba, crisis meetings

between local government, the parastatal credit agency and the project were being held. The upshot was that non-fishing officials were removed from the list, some one-boat owners and women's marketing groups were added, and the credit fund agent went on holiday. To my knowledge, none of the project staff who took part in the appraisal has suffered repercussions from the pressure they put on the loan process.

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## • Discussion

Both appraisal teams, in Guinea and Tanzania, faced up to tensions within the communities and hostility between the communities and their project employers. Members of both teams commented that this was not an exercise "for students", since much of the facilitating involved social judgements one could only expect from experienced professionals. For many, this was a more important finding than the feeling that they had learned from using particular methods and that their own local knowledge had grown with the experience.

Although both outcomes were happy ones for the projects concerned, the social implications are different. The Guinea experience is a positive tale of PRA facilitating or precipitating change and intervention which might have taken place anyway, given the interest of the project management and the dedication of the project staff.

In Tanzania however, the team's fortuitous timing saved FAO and the local administration from a serious error in accepting corruption. Whereas the Guinea staff risked little more than continuing hostility over debt repayments had they not reached an amicable solution to the credit issue, the Tanzanian staff would not have been able to go back to those villages where corruption had been discussed without themselves being lynched for complicity.

This article has described two examples of potential conflicts which were resolved constructively. However this is not always the case, which points to the need to anticipate that most participatory research will uncover conflicts of interest. Do facilitators and researchers have the skills to deal with such situations?