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Linking PRA-based research to policy

Victoria Johnson

• Linking research to policy

To make research relevant and accessible to policy makers at different levels of decision-making, three processes need to run in parallel: detailed field research, policy research and dissemination.

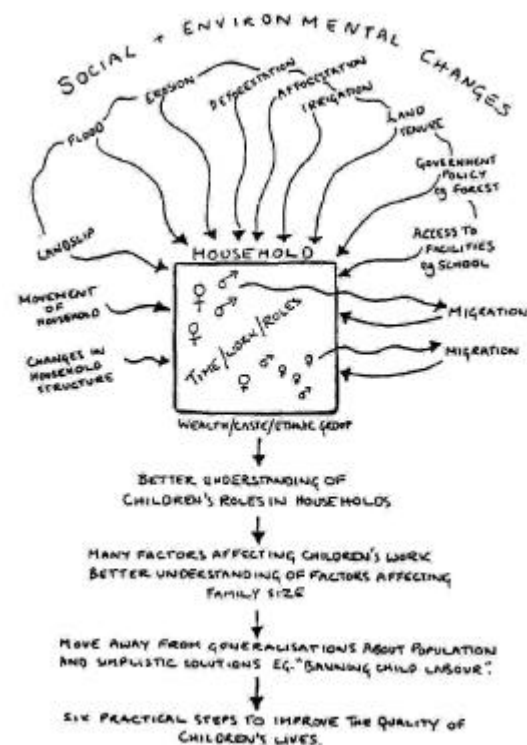
In this article I describe these different processes in the context of an ACTIONAID research project on children's roles in development¹. These reflections aim to encourage those engaged in field level PRA work to consider how this does or does not, and can or can not, influence policies. It is in the influencing of policies that lasting changes can be brought about. I conclude by highlighting some of the problems with these processes and with linking practice to policy.

Listening to smaller voices

The research project aimed to provide detailed primary data to understand children's roles in the household: how girls and boys share their work burdens with adults and how these

burdens change with environmental and socio-economic change. We wanted to move away from policy debates rife with generalisations about population and environment and away from simplistic solutions, such as the immediate banning of all child labour. The research findings led to a suggested programme of work which offers six practical steps to improve the quality of children's lives (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Children's work



¹ The research was carried out by the author and Joanna Hill, with Edda Ivan-Smith and researchers from ACTIONAID Nepal and the UK, as well as contributions from other country programmes in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The work was funded by the UK Overseas Development Administration (ODA) through the Population and Environment Research Fund at Bradford University. The research and findings are laid out in the ACTIONAID report *Listening to Smaller Voices: Children in an Environment of Change*. Copies can be obtained from Maxine Roddich, ACTIONAID, Hamlyn House, Archway, London N19 5PG, UK.

• Issues for detailed field research

Detailed research was carried out in Sindhuli District of Nepal. Participatory methods, including different types of interviews, time allocation studies and observation techniques were used to understand the lives of villagers. The identification of more sensitive and innovative approaches to studying the roles of men, women girls and boys, has been a positive and exciting aspect of the research. Details of methods used, including the use of songs and dreams or aspirations of children, are described in the final report.

It was important to plan the field research in an area where ACTIONAID would be working in the near future. Thus the research findings would feed directly into the practical programming policies and also be relevant to the ongoing policy discussions at the national level, within ACTIONAID Nepal. This approach moves research away from being a purely extractive exercise towards a process which feeds into programme planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. To link the research to practical programming and policy, there were discussions and workshops held throughout the research period with ACTIONAID staff, both in Sindhuli and in the national office. Representatives from local NGOs, such as the Society for Participatory Cultural Education (SPACE) and Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN) were also closely involved in these discussions. The workshops focused on:

- History and objectives of the research;
- Relevant local cultural, political and ecosystem conditions; and,
- Methodology.

These helped to understand the research context better and to discuss the relevance of findings for the different programme areas and organisations. Thus the policy implications and recommendations could continue to be modified through the process of the research.

• Issues for policy research

While the detailed field research was being conducted in Nepal, a complementary process

of policy research and discussions was carried out. One aspect of this was to draw on examples from ACTIONAID research and programme work in the Gambia, Kenya, Uganda, Ecuador, Peru, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. Attitudes to the different roles of girls and boys in rural and urban development programmes were thus explored in different settings where a range of different approaches have been taken.

Another element of the policy research was to identify some of the written policies of relevant organisations and international agencies, such as UNICEF, the International Labour Office (ILO) and donor governments. In this way different policy perspectives were established as a starting point for further discussions with these agencies. It was also important to learn from practical examples of child focused programme approaches. Examples included CWIN, Redd Barna and the Undugu Society (Kenya) to show best practice for further policy discussions.

Using the field and policy research, practical steps were identified to improve the quality of children's lives via programme work. The first step suggested was to improve internal agency policy. The research highlighted the need for attitudinal changes to development planning and for modified organisational procedures if a better understanding of what children 'think and do' is to change policy and practice. In this step, principles of participation and the types of participatory approaches which can be built on are discussed. The first step also includes a discussion of the importance of child-focused indicators for monitoring and evaluation, and gender/age awareness training.

Both practical action at local level and supportive action at national and international levels are discussed in the other steps. An important step to improve the quality of children's lives is to advocate change at all levels. This includes influencing donor government and national action within the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

• Issues for dissemination

It is essential to plan dissemination at the start of the research. This should run alongside the rest of the research activities and can include research into the relevant contacts and how to pitch the information for different audiences. It is important that the dissemination not only feeds back to people with whom the research is done, but also spreads out to inform different programmes and policy debates (Figure 2).

It is also important to ensure that information is packaged in different ways for different types of audience. Some of the more anecdotal information at an early stage of the research in Nepal was used for feature articles in magazines and educational packs for schools. This is an important component to consider for a development agency in which public education and support are a priority.

Research issues and methodology can also be shared and disseminated in different fora before the research ends to stimulate interest in the subject area and think through potential policy implications. Throughout the research programme important contacts were entered onto a database. These contacts consisted of interested and influential people, although they are not necessarily the same. Everyone was invited to the final symposium and sent the report and other relevant information.

It is important to think of the production of a detailed report and its launch as the beginning of a process of research and development, rather than the end of the work. The final report, *Listening to Smaller Voices*, was produced for those interested and working in sustainable development, in offices and in the field. It was a priority to present the information in an accessible way. The role of the designers in the production of an attractive and readable reports was vital for drawing people into the subject.

Planning national workshops and symposia in both Nepal and London took time. Such dissemination and policy influencing activities should be planned for at the start of the work programme. Lynda Chalker, the Minister for Overseas Development in the UK, opened the

Symposium in London. This was followed by a carefully balanced series of talks to give the full flavour of the research objectives, findings and policy implications, and to place this in the context of broader policy debates at national and international levels. The presentation and accessibility of the talks were again thought to be important to keep the audience of policy decision-makers and practitioners interested. The speech made by Lynda Chalker has now been published by the UK Overseas Development

Figure 2. Disseminating research findings



Administration (ODA, 1995). The parallel event in Nepal was planned by ACTIONAID Nepal and made relevant to the national and international organisations working within Nepal. A special edition of the report was also produced in a style in which ACTIONAID Nepal felt was accessible to their audience.

We followed up with letters to gauge the response to the work. This letter was sent to ACTIONAID representatives from NGOs, academics, international agencies and members of donor governments. The way in which ACTIONAID and other development practitioners take into account a more child-

sensitive approach to their programming has continued to be assessed and evaluated.

- **Lessons learnt**

The field and policy research and the dissemination processes we followed certainly raised problems. I want to highlight some of them here, and to look also at how PRA practice can be linked to policy in the work on children's roles in development.

Imposing research topics

If the topic is a relatively new area of investigation and has hitherto been 'invisible' in the development process, this can make the organisations involved reluctant to take it up. This was the case when exploring how children take an active role in household survival strategies and when examining their daily work burdens. Children's research has tended more towards more visible issues such as their exploitation in factories or the difficulties faced by street children.

Discussing the issue of children's invisible roles in development at national and international fora such as the 1992 Earth Summit and in the lead up to the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, laid the ground for linking research to policy. However, despite initial support for the issue and a recognition of its importance by ACTIONAID Nepal, some of the staff involved in PRA still resisted prioritising it.

Discussing and sharing experiences in workshops with staff within the organisation and from other NGOs was an important way of overcoming this resistance. This helped to ensure that the issue was being tackled from the point of view of the field staff in the countries involved in the study. There is still the question of how seriously issues such as age and gender are taken by different levels of staff throughout such an organisation, both in the head and field offices. Linking research to external policy and advocacy work thus needs to be coupled with an internal process of understanding and capacity building.

PRA: an end in itself?

From the start, we stressed the need for an open approach to understanding people's lives and specifically what children 'think and do'. A range of participatory and other methods are suitable for this. However, instead of exploring an issue using a range of methods, some staff seemed to feel that PRA was the 'only way'. They applied the methods with a degree of rigidity and automation. There seems to be a tendency to look on PRA as an end in itself, as a pure and unpolluted new idea. This is incompatible with the need for an open approach to gain an understanding of complex and sensitive inter-and intra-household interactions.

Before getting PRA training, some of the field staff involved seemed more flexible, imaginative about and open to ideas about the potential use of PRA to explore children's roles. Ideas about the suitability of methods can unfortunately become more rigid after training. It took some time to realise that, for example, some methods suitable for adults may not be suitable for children, and to test new possibilities. However, in the end, the initiative, patience and enthusiasm of the field staff on the project helped us arrive at an effective mix of methods for our children-focused research.

Diversity convinces

Diagramming methods, focused interviews, questionnaires and anthropological techniques such as time allocation and direct observation, were useful for linking practice to policy. Policy makers were able to look at the situation from different angles using both general and specific case study observations. Attractive visuals, such as maps, diagrams and children's drawings were included in the report. These helped to draw people into the final analysis. Case studies and the aspirations of individual children were backed up with general observations made in group work. A questionnaire, used to understand the head of household perspectives on issues of environmental and social change, provided background information and was used to compare with later findings from other methods.

Raising expectations

It is important to acknowledge and understand the different expectations of different actors in practice and policy arenas so as to provide information in a suitable form at an appropriate time for their needs.

Research may raise expectations, not only among the people in local communities, but also within an organisation, such as the public relations and fundraising sections or those involved in programme planning. This can often put pressure on those in the field to draw conclusions before the work has even begun and to feel that the answers and solutions should be known before the situation is properly understood. There needs to be a balance when linking these different concerns. Varying levels of information and distinct outputs can help the relevant people understand the process and analysis to date, but uninformed solutions should not be forced.

Sharing

The value of sharing ideas and information with other people and organisations working on similar issues is of the utmost importance for influencing lasting change. There can be competition between agencies for publicity and funding sources. However, in the area of influencing policy there are great advantages in learning from others' experiences and practices and then, where there is agreement, backing each other up in policy statements and advocacy.

In conclusion, there are ways to make research accessible to policy makers at different levels through parallel processes of field research, policy research and dissemination. There are still, however, many problems to overcome. These include attitudes to using a diversity of methods, and the ways in which people approach their work within different organisational contexts. These should continue to be discussed so that we can all learn from the experience of others and link more effectively PRA practice with policy change.

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REFERENCE

- ODA. 1995. Children: Seen but not heard. Implications for ODA's work with children in partner countries. Baroness Chalker's speech to ACTIONAID Symposium, 28 March 1995. ODA, London.