

Making the best of going to scale

Robert Chambers

· Introduction

Predictably, PRA is being demanded on a large scale. Large donor organisations, Northern NGOs and large NGOs in the South are increasingly coming to use, and encouraging or requiring the use of, PRA approaches and methods in their projects and programmes. The role call is impressive. It includes FAO, IFAD, UNDP, UNICEF, and the World Bank; CIDA, DANIDA, FINNIDA, GTZ, NORAD, ODA, SDC, and SIDA; ACORD, ACTIONAID, CARE, Christian Aid, Farm Africa, Ford Foundation, Intercooperation, NOVIB, OXFAM, PLAN International, Redd Barna, SCF, World Vision, World Neighbours and the World Resources Institute. It also includes large Southern NGOs, BRAC, MYRADA and others, as well as thousands of smaller NGOs. And any listing like this, by one person, is bound to leave out other major actors (to whom I apologise). Less well recognised, government departments in the South are increasingly adopting PRA and requiring its use on a wide scale, not least in forestry, poverty programmes, soil and water conservation and watershed management, water and sanitation, and urban programmes.

Scale has already been achieved. To identify the poorest, and select and deselect households in poverty programmes, well-being ranking was used by MYRADA in the early 1990s in hundreds of villages in South India, and later by ACTIONAID for a population of some 36,000 in Pakistan. Staff of ACTIONAID, Nepal, in 1991 facilitated participatory evaluation of activities they had supported in some 130 villages (Phuyan, 1992). In Kenya, the Soil and Water Conservation Branch of the Ministry of Agriculture has for six years been

developing and extending a participatory approach to watershed planning and management (Thompson, forthcoming). In India, Forest Departments have widely adopted Joint Forest Management in which PRA approaches and methods are a significant element, by now probably with thousands of communities. In Integrated Pest Management in Indonesia, at least 1,500 groups of farmers have made participatory maps which they use to plot the location and prevalence of pests, to plan action, and to monitor changes (Russ Dilts, pers. comm.). Again in Indonesia, from late 1994 through early 1995, as a component of a poverty alleviation programme, PRA activities were conducted in 285 of the poorest and most remote villages (some requiring a three-day walk to reach) in four months from the first training of trainers. In Vietnam, an IFAD-supported programme has carried out 350 activities described as PRAs (but using questionnaires!) in less than six months. And there are now quite numerous other examples.

Proposals by some government departments to go to scale are now formidable. In Kenya, the Soil and Water Conservation Branch of the Ministry of Agriculture is proposing in the 1995-96 financial year to launch participatory planning in 809 catchments covering 177,000 hectares and 93,000 farm families (Thompson, forthcoming).

In India, PRA approaches and methods have been incorporated in the guidelines for the national programme for watershed management, intended eventually for some 30,000 villages in 300 districts in 22 states, covering an ultimate 15 million hectares. This began with the training of 336 state-level trainers from 56 training institutions in 14 four-week courses conducted between April and August 1995. The trainings were to have no lectures, and to include a week on PRA,

with 3-4 days in villages. A multi-media package has been prepared for the ultimate training of 12,000 field staff.

In Indonesia, the use of PRA is being considered for a new anti-poverty programme which is proposed for over 2,000 villages with UNICEF support, and for 20,000 villages in another Government programme. And there are other examples from India, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Vietnam and elsewhere.

• **Questions of quality**

The trend seems set to continue. Short of massive negative experiences or some freak change of fashion, more and more field departments of government and other large organisations will seek to adopt and apply PRA approaches and methods on a large scale in the months and years to come.

This presents dangers and opportunities. Recent experience and analysis have shed light on the institutional problems presented by participatory approaches, and their implications for strategy (Kar and Backhaus 1994; Samaranayake 1994; Backhaus and Wagachchi 1995; Thompson forthcoming; Guijt, 1995). Going to scale raises acute questions of quality assurance. Shortcomings have included:

- neglect of behaviour and attitudes;
- top-down training in classrooms by people without field orientation or experience;
- opportunists claiming to be trainers, or to 'use PRA' when they are not aware of empowerment issues (some university academics have been among the worst offenders);
- reward systems which stress targets for disbursements and for physical achievements (often donor-driven);
- rushing in and out of communities in order to achieve preset targets for villages covered and sums disbursed;
- routine and ritual use of methods;
- one-off extractive appraisal without analysis, planning or action;
- interaction only or mainly with those who are better off and men

- overriding bottom-up priorities with predetermined top-down packages
- labelling conventional questionnaires as 'PRA'; and even
- the fabrication of 'outputs'!

Concerns about practices such as these have been repeatedly raised by PRA trainers and others (see *Sharing our Concerns* in *PLA Notes* 22). These errors have sometimes been recognised and embraced. Approaches, corrections and changes which have had or have promised positive outcomes include:

- increased priority given to behaviour and attitudes in training;
- more time for participation and institution-building in the early stages of programmes and projects, with bigger budgets for training, and less for infrastructure;
- tenacious and persistent internal working groups, as for participation in the World Bank, and as for RRA and PRA in FAO;
- no targets for disbursements or coverage, and provision that unspent budgets can be rolled forward from year to year;
- changes in project procedures to provide for participation and diversity;
- a process approach permitting continuous revisions to on-going projects;
- preceding, not following, LFA (logical framework analysis) or ZOPP with PRA activities involving the poor, women, and marginal groups in their own analysis, identifying their own priorities;
- starting on a pilot and experimental basis in part of an organisation, or in one geographical area;
- continuity over years with an outside facilitating organisation; and,
- stability in supportive senior management.

Together these contribute to a shift towards more participatory management cultures in organisations.

• **A moment of choice**

The fact that so many organisations are going to scale confronts those of us engaged in the development and spread of participatory approaches and methods with choices and

dilemmas. Each of us has to decide for ourselves what it is best to do. What follows is a personal view, and I may be wrong. Reader, please decide for yourself.

A major personal decision is where to act on the continuum between the small and beautiful, and the big and blotchy. This can be expressed as three options.

The first option is to go for the small and secure. Quality can be assured by working on a small scale with a very few communities. This can be both personally satisfying and professionally safe. Intense local engagement can also explore the potentials of PRA and generate innovations at the community level.

The second or middle option is extended engagement with particular organisations at a district or regional level, working over months and years in support of participatory approaches and incremental organisational change. This permits PRA to influence institutional culture, and can generate insights into the means and potentials for institutional change.

The third course is to work with organisations which are going to bigger scale quickly. This involves trade-offs. The principle is that the best should not be the enemy of the good or of the less bad. This course may be risky. There will be abuses and deceptions. Critics will not be few. Compromises will have to be made. Negative academics will find plenty to expose and be wise about. To accept the challenge of scale does, then, require courage.

In my view, all three approaches are needed and are complementary. Each of us will make our own choices, using our own best judgements. As ever, pluralism seems the best way forward, with different people doing different things in different places, some on a small scale, intensively, some with sustained commitment and engagement in the middle range, and others on a large scale, extensively, with all sharing experience and learning from each other.

Given the risks and inevitable defects, the case needs to be put for working with the third option, accepting the challenge of going quite fast to scale. I would argue that becoming

involved in an imperfect process, where abuses and errors may at first abound, can be personally and professionally responsible. Two reasons stand out.

First, the benefits to poor people can be greater from doing less well on a wide scale than from doing better on a small scale. The total gain to poor people may be much greater through initiating and supporting small changes in large organisations and programmes than through big gains in small programmes and programmes. Real world alternatives and causal chains are complex and uncertain, but the recognition of trade-offs between quality, scale and impact has, I believe, to be part of responsible decisions about where to work and what to do.

Second, in going to scale, even when much goes wrong, there may be benign viruses in PRA (behaviour and attitudes, handing over the stick, 'they can do it', 'use your own best judgement at all times', and so on) which can gain a foothold in large organisations, and then start to work away and spread. Bureaucratic structure can be exploited. In a large-scale watershed programme, for example, it can be required that the maps used for planning must be made by, and retained by, farmers. This has the potential to force staff to facilitate, to startle staff with what farmers can do, and to empower farmers in the planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation process. In the longer-term, benign viruses may contribute to more participatory procedures, management styles and organisational cultures. There will also be some, in every organisation, for whom the approach and methods are legitimating and liberating, allowing and enabling them to interact and facilitate in new, empowering ways from which they would otherwise be barred.

Experience to date suggests the importance of long-term engagement between an individual, team or training NGO and any large organisation which seeks to adopt a participatory approach. There is no quick fix. The in-out consultancy can sow seeds but most likely they will wither. The watershed programmes in Kenya and India which are going to scale are both building on five to six years of experience and engagement with other

organisations which have supported change with training, experiment and learning from experience. Similarly, the SIDA-supported government programme in Northern Vietnam has received sustained support and training from the same joint team over at least four years. Those who become involved with going to scale would do well to reflect on the implications of these similar experiences.

What is happening, and going to happen, demands personal decisions. Things are happening fast. Spread seems to be exponential. The word "URGENT" is overworked. But both chaos theory and common sense indicate that there are times and places when small shifts have big effects later, moving whole systems into different paths and spaces. I sense this to be one such time. My best judgement is that what is done, and not done, during the next few months and years, will, seen and unseen, have huge effects, in fact or by default, in future decades; and that many of these effects or lack of effects will apply to women, the poor and the marginalised. The question is whether we have the vision, judgement and guts to see and do the right things now.

• **A programme of action**

Let me propose a programme of action:

Draw up a personal code of ethics, either individually, or in small groups of professionals, to guide decisions and actions. This could include 'uncompromisables', sticking points on which we will not yield, for those of us involved in going to scale.

Hang in with a big programme over a matter of years, trying to slow it when it is too fast, establishing footholds, supporting those who wish to change, and helping those in power to shift the steering wheel bit by bit in a more participatory direction.

Stress behaviour and attitudes again and again as centrally important, including self-critical awareness and learning, embracing error, sitting down, listening and learning, not interrupting, facilitating.

Develop, innovate, improve, share and apply behaviour and attitude training modules and materials (URGENTLY).

Train other trainers, with critical learning and improvement through feedback from trainers trained, those trained by them, and the experience of field action.

Observe, record and learn from the experience of participatory research going to scale in big organisations, warts and all, and sharing the insights widely.

Encourage self-evaluations and critical reflection within organisations.

Work with the "benign virus" effect; improve the viruses and their insertion and spread.

Build alliances and share experiences with all the above to be sensitive, sustained and efficient between actors at all levels, between organisations, and between countries and continents.

All this demands participatory research, learning, sharing and training. As things are, I do not think we are anywhere near being able to meet the needs of the time. People in the future may look back and wonder how and why we were so slow to act, and acted on such a small scale, when the opportunities were so vast.

The *Book of Common Prayer* begins its confession with errors of omission: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done". Where governments and other large organisations are going to scale, we are faced with a choice: whether to get involved or not. The stakes are high. Scope abounds for errors of omission. Not to act is a choice, itself an action. I have expressed a personal view in this note. Have I got it right, or wrong?

Each of us has to use our own best judgement. What is yours? What is right for you?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robert Chambers, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, Sussex, BN1 9RE, UK.

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