

## 13

### Participatory approaches in Save the Children Fund, UK

Louisa Gosling

- **Save the Children Fund in a changing world**

Save the Children Fund (SCF) is a large, complex organisation operating in a messy and complicated world. In its 75 years of existence, the development work of SCF and the nature of the organisation itself have evolved and expanded in response to a changing environment. The aim of this piece is to stimulate discussion about the role, strengths and weaknesses of participatory approaches, and particularly Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in the context of SCF, UK. Any comments would be welcome.

- The environment in which SCF operates has changed in several ways:
- The number of programmes and geographical spread has increased and with it the number of staff and level of bureaucracy at headquarters, regional and country level;
- The approach towards development work has changed, focusing more on developing local capacity and on building local ownership, and away from service provision or programmes based on top-down decisions;
- Official donors are channelling more overseas aid money through Northern and Southern NGOs, making NGOs more clearly accountable to donors and increasing the influence of donors on NGO policy and practice;

- SCF is making more use of its experience in advocacy work to influence donors, other NGOs, governments and other decision-makers; and,
- Countries and governments with whom we work are becoming poorer, and are decentralising control for many essential services like health, education and social welfare. Many southern NGOs are springing up which affects SCF's relationships with its partners, and its role in working with government.

When SCF, UK was smaller it was possible to rely on informal ways of learning from experience and developing policy and practice. In a bigger organisation the informal methods of communication and decision making have to be supplemented by formal systems.

Some things, however, remain the same, two of which are particularly relevant to the use of PRA in SCF. Firstly, SCF has a long-term commitment and involvement in its country programmes. Secondly the power relations within and between NGOs, donors, partners, governments and local people have been and will continue to be complex, unequal, and inevitably to some extent, non-transparent.

In the present environment it is essential that SCF is as analytic, systematic and participatory as reasonably possible in planning and managing its work. This is the only way in which it can build on its long, diverse and perpetually changing experience in order to improve its effectiveness, respond to change, and continue

to be innovative. And it is the only way it can communicate effectively with the many different stakeholders in the whole rich tapestry of its environment, from the World Bank to refugee children.

To this end SCF has introduced a strategic planning process, and an overall approach towards assessing, monitoring, and evaluating its work. The underlying principles are that assessment, monitoring, review and evaluation should be *participatory* (all the relevant people should be involved); they should *recognise differences and avoid discrimination*; and they should be carried out in a *systematic* way to ensure a balanced view of the situation. Beyond these underlying principles, the techniques and approaches used should be selected according to the particular situation. To support this approach the "*Assessment, monitoring, review and evaluation Toolkits*" have been produced. They present the principles and practical issues involved in the processes, and describe a number of tools - techniques and approaches- which may be useful at different stages of the processes. PRA is one such approach.

- **SCF's use of PRA**

The issue for SCF in using PRA is how it can be used effectively, recognising its weaknesses and limitations as discussed in this issue of *PLA Notes*, and within the very real constrictions of our work. The discussion around PRA often concentrates on the conditions necessary for a 'pure PRA'. In other words, when the purpose is to empower communities to plan, implement and manage their own development. This is undoubtedly a very desirable goal, but as an organisation we are not at the stage when we can honestly say this is possible in all cases, nor is it always appropriate. The bureaucracy, power relations, historical developments and organisational factors described above all mean that SCF is unlikely to be involved purely as a facilitator in a community development process.

How, then, can PRA be of most use to an organisation like SCF? There are several specific areas in which it has proven useful, as the following case studies illustrate.

## PRA for research

Participatory methods have proved useful for gathering qualitative information in a systematic way (Box 1). This has helped SCF staff and partners understand the needs and perceptions of people who will be affected by development activities, and to respond to those needs. The information gathered can be used for purposes of accountability (within SCF, to beneficiaries and donors) through assessment, monitoring, review and evaluation; and can also be used for research and advocacy.

### BOX 1

#### PRA AND THE FOOD ECONOMY IN SOUTHERN SUDAN

SCF is involved in training World Food Programme monitors in South Sudan to carry out research into the food economy and what it means at the household level. Information is collected using different methods and then analysed following a framework which has been developed as part of the SCF research into vulnerability mapping, and the '*food economy approach*'. The information is converted into figures to provide quantitative data about the amounts of food available compared with what is required. Different methods are used to collect the information, including seasonal calendars, community mapping, pairwise ranking, and key-informant interviews. The views of different people are cross-checked to see which food sources are most important at different times of year, and to check for internal consistency in the '*food economy*' model. The community maps are made first with as many people as possible to help orient researchers when they first arrive in a village. Seasonal calendars are drawn with men and women separately. Children are also interviewed.

## PRA for training and awareness

Participatory training can be more effective than conventional workshops and seminars in changing people's behaviour and attitudes and transferring new skills. PRA training and field experiences can be used to build the capacity of development workers to involve, listen to, communicate with and interpret the views of community members, and to facilitate their direct representations. This also encourages awareness of the realities of life for people in

the South (Box 2). This is a vital first step in gradually changing attitudes within SCF and creating an organisational culture which is more participatory.

**BOX 2  
PRA AND TRAINING**

A PRA field workshop was held in Jijiga, Ethiopia, for staff about to be involved in community rehabilitation, having previously worked only in refugee camps weighing and measuring children. The workshop was designed to promote the skills needed to identify community needs and facilitate community development. Different participatory methods were introduced in the workshop, but the most widely adopted new skill has been semi-structured interviewing. Participants have learnt how to ask probing questions, and how to cross-check information with different key informants. Role play in the workshop was useful in improving interviewing techniques, and practical exercises were used to explore different aspects of communication, for example, the importance of body language. The workshop and field exercise were found to be useful in learning new skills and approaches, but it was recognised that a whole new way of working is needed to enable SCF to respond to needs identified by communities.

A PRA workshop is also planned in Iraq to help increase the capacity of urban-based staff to investigate community rehabilitation needs more effectively, and to improve the sustainability of the SCF inputs by ensuring greater local involvement in the planning and management process.

### **Participatory monitoring and evaluation**

A more participatory approach to monitoring and evaluation can gradually increase the ability and confidence of staff and partners in programme management and development, especially in areas where staff have had limited education and experience in programme management. This approach can only work where the programme has been designed to respond to the lessons learnt through the monitoring and evaluation process (Box 3).

**BOX 3  
PRA FOR EVALUATION IN MALI**

In Mali, participatory approaches were used by a team from SCF and Suivi Alimentaire du Delta Seno (SADS) to find out what women thought of a Grameen bank for a women's association<sup>1</sup>. They were questioned about the impact of the programme in terms of increased income; the capacity for self-management of the association; and the sustainability of the project and future inputs required. The women were divided into three groups - poor, medium, and rich - according to their own criteria for wealth ranking. Each group was questioned using semi-structured interviews and ranking exercises using stones to represent changes in capital, income, expenditure and the relative importance of different income generating activities. The recommendations for the future of the programme were based on a discussion of the different views of the different groups of women.

A shortcoming of the review was that there was not enough cross-checking of some of the findings which seemed to be contradictory. There was also no real attempt to find out how the project has affected children. The experience of the review has shown that participatory research is fun and engaging for both the reviewers and the beneficiaries. The Malians are comfortable using local materials to draw pictures and to represent quantities. The partner agency was very interested to learn about the approach, and it was good for all the staff to see how much villagers know when given appropriate tools to express themselves.

### **PRA to focus on children's needs**

Participatory methods may play a useful role in turning SCF into a more child-focused agency, by explicitly involving children in any programme assessment, monitoring or evaluation. They may also help to develop the capacity of staff to communicate with children in order to involve them and to help them to represent their own views.

<sup>1</sup> The Grameen Bank provides affordable credit via groups of women at village level. For further information about this project see Rapport de l'évaluation sur la banque "Grameen" de l'association des femmes d'Attara. Cercle de Youvarou, République du Mali, 1994.

For example in Kratie province, Cambodia, a PRA needs assessment has been carried out by a local consultancy firm to find out about the needs of children in the area. The aim of the research was to ensure that children's views and needs should provide a focus for any SCF activities in the province.

### • **Future of participatory approaches in SCF**

These experiences with PRA and other participatory approaches will gradually feed back into SCF. There is growing recognition throughout the organisation of the importance of systematic information collection and analysis generally, and the value of participatory approaches in particular. The awareness and skills of a growing number of individual members of staff will gradually increase SCF's capacity to use the approaches properly in the context of its work. We also need to analyse experience within SCF and other organisations more formally, in order to explore how PRA can best be used for the purposes suggested here, capitalising on its strengths and avoiding its weaknesses.

PRA also has potential for helping develop partnerships between SCF, communities, government and other partners over a long period, and to bridge gaps between government and communities, and different levels of governments with whom we work. To create a relationship between partners in which different perceptions, priorities and political realities can be explored in a systematic way, mutually acknowledged and built upon in developing programmes.

A *Children's Agenda* has been drawn up by SCF to show why and how children should be placed at the centre of all social development activities. Children's participation is one of the recommendations for practical programming, and a wide range of approaches need to be developed to help involve children of different ages, cultures, and situations in different stages of programme planning, implementation and evaluation<sup>2,3</sup>. The capacity of development workers to involve, communicate and interpret

children's views also needs to be systematically strengthened. Participatory approaches may be one way to help do this.

• **Louisa Gosling**, Overseas Information and Research, Save the Children Fund, 17 Grove Lane, London SE5 8RD, UK.

### NOTES

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Save the Children.

<sup>2</sup> The next issue of PLA Notes will be a semi-focus issue on the use of participatory approaches with and for children.