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Development of PRA in Francophone Africa: lessons from the Sahel

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• Introduction

The Sahel region has offered a fertile bed for the operational application of PRA through *"Gestion de Terroirs"* approaches that are being pursued in many countries. Since 1989 the experience with PRA in francophone West Africa has grown enormously and there is now a French language newsletter on PRA, *Relais MARP*, the third issue of which is now being produced[1].

IIED's PRA-Sahel Programme has established networks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal[2]. The networks focus much of their efforts on providing PRA training. In particular their aims are to:

• Strengthen the capacity of relevant institutions to conduct participatory planning, follow-up and evaluation of development programmes at the grassroots level;

• Identify obstacles to PRA development in the region; and,

• Maintain standards in the use of the methods.

This article analyses the problems encountered by the networks in trying to achieve these aims, and then suggests some possible ways forward.

• The challenges

In June 1994, a workshop was held in Saly Portudal, Senegal, to discuss issues relating to the rapid development of PRA in the region.

Most of the participants work in NGOs and are also members of the national PRA networks. They have been using PRA at the early stages of their project cycles or as an evaluation tool. One Senegalese NGO, Associates in Research and Development (ARED), has been working with IIED to design training for community members themselves (Box 1).

Internal challenges

The difficulties encountered by the networks were identified by participants at the workshop. Some have faced internal challenges, including:

• Inadequate training capacity. The few trainers available are struggling to meet the ever increasing demand for training. Consequently poorly-trained instructors provide training, thus spreading their limited knowledge and skills amongst NGOs and development projects. This has sometimes led to misinterpretations and poorly applied PRA principles in the field.

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[1] *Relais MARP* is produced by and available from the Drylands programme, IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, UK.

[2] The four national network coordinators are: *Mathieu Ouedraogo*: PAF, BP 200 Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, Tel: (+226) 550 268. Fax: (+226) 550 007; *Idrissa Maiga*: GRAD, BP 5075, Bamako, Mali, Tel: (+223) 222 359. Fax: (+223) 228 873; *Malamine Savane*: CONGAD, BP 4109 Dakar, Senegal, Tel: (+221) 244 116. Fax: (+221) 244 413; and I*di Ango Oumarou*: Agri-Service Plus, BP 10557, Niamey, Niger, Tel: (+227) 734 947. Fax: (227) 734 347.

-up
and evaluation of programmes which fall
under the responsibility of networks.

External threats

However, there are also external threats to the
development of PRA within the region, such
as:

- PRA is too fashionable within the NGO
  community, creating great external
  pressure to adopt this approach quickly;

- The formal approach to PRA of many
  development professionals prevents the
  creativity and flexibility that was the
  trademark of early PRA-based work;

- Routinised practice has pushed the use of
  PRA away from its initial objectives and
  places local populations outside the
  decision-making processes; and,

- There is a tendency to view PRA as a
  panacea and, thus, to use it any old way,
  because of the wrong assumption that it
  will work well automatically.

- ## Some ways forward

PRA training for grassroots communities is
one of the most important objectives of the
PRA-SAHEL Programme. The networks want
to make PRA more suited to the needs of these
communities. They are, therefore, increasingly
emphasising the strengthening of local
people's capacities for analysis, understanding
and intervention.

To achieve this, the networks produce teaching
aids, establish follow-up and evaluation

mechanisms, retrain trainers, and adapt materials to local contexts and objectives.

Translating concepts into local languages is essential (Box 1) and the networks recommend that such initiatives are done by local people. This can avoid semantic confusions that could crop up during communications between development technicians and the populations.

Network monitoring and support is an important aspect of dissemination and collaboration between networks helps to promote interaction and complementarity between the various activities (see below). To maintain the quality of training programmes, the networks are developing indicators for evaluation, and are trying hard to find ways of working with less assistance from IIED.

Improving organisational culture

At the level of networks, PRA depends upon an organisational culture that promotes participation. Without this, no approach can produce positive results, whatever operational procedures and techniques are used. For this reason, it is essential for the networks to facilitate the institutionalisation of PRA amongst relevant organisations. For such a process to succeed there must be:

- A conscious and critical adoption of the principles and spirit of PRA as a working plan;

- A move away from the *ad hoc* or opportunistic use of PRA, towards promoting a committed involvement of grassroots communities in a long-term participatory planning process;

- An awareness that a participatory methodology is not a fixed concept and that its application and tools evolve with time and under prevailing circumstances. This entails open-mindedness and innovative and creative capacities;

- An understanding that PRA is essentially a qualitative process and not a quantitative concept;

- Staff training which ensures a better understanding not only of the practical PRA process but also of its methodological roots;

- The development of an organisational structure that promotes the philosophy of participation;

- An awareness that objectives will not be achieved quickly. Hence donors, in particular, must not only reconsider the time period set for projects and programmes expected to promote participation but they must also adapt their financial and management procedures to the requirements of participatory processes; and

- A commitment to 'community self-development' not merely as a political objective but as a realistic goal. Making available the means of achieving this (by decentralising resources, providing training and strengthening the institutional capacity of community structures) will be key.

Monitoring is particularly critical in the context of the Sahel because of the rapid pace of adoption of PRA. That is why quality assurance has become the utmost priority for all organisations who are adopting PRA in their work. Here are some of the action points that the networks have identified as important:

1. The design of any training programme should explicitly take into account the issue of follow-up and evaluation. Not only should the issue be addressed, but the development of methods and procedures for monitoring and evaluation of the training impact should be part of any PRA training programme;

2. Organisations engaged in training should have a clear idea of the output that is expected from their training. Moreover they should identify clear, context-specific indicators for measuring changes brought about by the use of PRA;

3. There should be mechanisms to allow an efficient exchange of experience among the different networks and to make 'good practices' known. Networks should also

set up frameworks for follow-up and evaluation of the development of PRA;

4. Seek ways to encourage and strengthen linkages among different regional networks; and,

5. Focus more efforts on improving information generation and dissemination.

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