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PRA for risk reduction: lessons from Mozambique

Ailsa Holloway and Diane Lindsey

· Introduction

Today we are acutely aware that community participation is key to the success of development programmes. But what about community involvement in, and after, disasters? For example, what about the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced and refugee Mozambicans who returned to villages destroyed after nearly two decades of hostilities? Are the communities affected by events such as these merely passive recipients of aid? Have they become so dependent on outside help that they are disinterested in taking measures themselves which could help them be better prepared?

PRA is increasingly viewed as a method which enables NGOs and their clients to plan programmes jointly to reduce community vulnerability. The Southern African Regional Delegation of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is one of many humanitarian agencies which actively promotes the use of PRA for community assessment, and has advocated its use in community-based disaster mitigation planning[1].

In this paper, we intend to show how PRA can be a useful tool in assessing the hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities of disaster-prone communities, for empowering them to reduce their risk to known threats and for improving programme planning. The paper is based on a field experience with refugee returnees in Tete Province, Mozambique.

· Background and methods used

The community in Tete is in the process of re-establishing itself after several years in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. As part of the rehabilitation process, a number of outside organisations have developed programmes to put these communities back on their feet. However, it seems that many of these programmes were carried out without a complete picture of the area' s risk profile (especially the fact that it is drought-prone). Moreover, there appeared to be little understanding of the community' s capacity to deal with drought in the past, and how this capacity needed to be supported and strengthened as the returnee communities re-established themselves.

As a result the programmes, although well-intended, have not been as effective as they might have been in reducing the vulnerability of the communities. For example, while returnees did receive seeds, these were non drought-tolerant maize seeds and were delivered late for planting. Thus the crop failed because of the prevailing drought conditions.

We spent three days working with several communities, followed by a review of the information gathered. Information for programme-planning that was risk-sensitive and, specifically, drought-sensitive was generated. They were also of help to outsiders trying to understand the drought-related vulnerability and capacity of the refugee returnees. Box 1 describes the type of information generated using a variety of PRA methods.

[1] More details of ways in which PRA can be applied to disaster mitigation are also described in *Reducing risk: participatory learning activities for disaster mitigation in Southern Africa*, jointly published by and available from the Southern African Delegation of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the Department of Adult and Community Education at the University of Natal.

Source: PLA Notes (1996), Issue 25, pp.6–8, IIED London

BOX 1
METHODS FOR UNDERSTANDING COPING STRATEGIES

Time-line
From the time-line, events that had occurred in the community were tracked over many years. This revealed that the hazard of drought was a recurrent event in the community' s past. We also learned that the community had been able to cope with these droughts in the past. For example, the ?Kansale' drought of 1973 got its name from the particular wild fruit that the community ate to survive. At this time, the community was also cultivating drought-tolerant crops, such as sorghum. So although people were drought-affected, they were fully able to manage without external assistance.

Time trend
This helped us understand the rain patterns during a good harvest year, compared with those during a bad one. This way we were also able to understand the drought' s impact on crop production. The time trends were also useful for knowing when the demands are for work in the fields. This was key for planning community meetings or other gatherings that would take time away from cultivation.

Seasonality mapping
This revealed the times when people collect wild foods such as fruit, nuts, roots etc.

Community mapping
This showed where the water sources were located, allowing a better understanding of drought-related vulnerabilities.

Needs matrix
This helped to prioritise the community' s most urgent needs: food, water and medicine.

· From PRA to disaster reduction planning

The key findings generated by the PRA methods allowed us to begin planning a programme to build on existing capacity amongst the community and address their vulnerabilities in order to reduce the impact of recurrent drought. Some of the capacities and vulnerabilities revealed during the PRA exercises include:

- The fact that the area is drought-prone.
- Hunger/food insecurity is perceived as the most important risk facing the community.
- Lack of safe and accessible water as well as essential medicines are perceived as key vulnerabilities by the community.
- Older members of the community have good knowledge of and openness to using drought-tolerant crops.
- Older members of the community are knowledgeable about the availabilities and use of wild foods.
- The community indicated when they would be fully committed to preparing and cultivating their fields, highlighting a capacity to protect household food security, which any outside intervention should not undermine.

Building on some of the capacities identified above (such as the awareness amongst older community members of the importance of drought-tolerant seed, and the clear commitment by the community to cultivate fields actively, due to their desire to not remain passive recipie nts of food aid), a programme to reduce drought-related vulnerability could have three components:

- Start up distribution of drought-tolerant seeds such as sorghum, as well as maize and groundnut.
- Start a community-managed seed bank.
- Provide training for young people in local cultivation methods by involving the older members of the community. It should be remembered that most of the young people have spent much of their formative years in refugee camps, where food was delivered by relief agencies and not cultivated by the household.

· Conclusions

As shown here, it is important that from a disaster-reduction perspective, PRA be used to assess key vulnerabilities and capacities, as these relate to the risks faced by disaster-prone

Source: PLA Notes (1996), Issue 25, pp.6–8, IIED London

communities. Compared to other assessment methods, PRA is particularly powerful as it:

- actively involves the community;
- empowers the community to identify the risks and priorities as well as their capacities to reduce these risks;
- provides a picture of the community' s perceptions of the risks it faces;
- allows both community insiders and outsiders to jointly identify risk reduction measures; and,
- is both time- and cost-effective.

In this example, PRA provided a wealth of information directly relevant to the risks affecting returnee communities, and the capacities which could be strengthened to reduce these. This type of information is critical if outside agencies are to develop programmes which lower both disaster risk and community vulnerability in the long-term.

- **Ailsa Holloway** and **Diane Lindsey**, c/o Regional Delegation, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 11 Phillips Avenue, Belgravia, Harare, Zimbabwe.

Source: PLA Notes (1996), Issue 25, pp.6–8, IIED London