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Staff perceptions of
the impact of PRA on MYRADA's work

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• Introduction

This article summarises the perceived impact of PRA on the work of MYRADA, a rural development NGO based in Southern India. These perceptions were shared at a two day workshop in November 1994, which was attended by over 15 MYRADA staff.

The MYRADA workshop was one of a series of seven workshops[1] held with other NGOs and government organisations in South Asia, which have been using a PRA approach in their work with communities. Uniquely, amongst all these workshops, participants at the MYRADA workshop decided to use the project cycle (planning, implementation and evaluation) as an organising theme for reflection. This proved to be very useful in practice and also reflects the continued domination (at MYRADA and elsewhere) of the project and the project cycle in the practice of externally initiated development efforts.

In writing this report, I have tried to use the words used by the workshop participants themselves (as recorded in their workshop report), wherever possible. Many of the sentences in this article which may sound like statements of fact, are therefore only the subjective impressions that emerged from the MYRADA workshop, as written up by one or more of the participants. They may or may not, therefore, correspond to the 'objective'

reality, a reality about which other staff at MYRADA (or indeed individual MYRADA workshop participants) may have different views. The views expressed in this article are therefore not the views of the author, nor of MYRADA as an organisation.

• Methodology

Reflections on the perceived impact of PRA were encouraged using a system of cards, where everyone was asked to write down (or draw) what they felt this had been. All the participants chose to write down their reflections.

The participants considered the impact of PRA on a *before* and *after* basis. This was done in four groups, all of whom also looked at the perceived impact of PRA in terms of the project cycle.

• Perceived impact of PRA on planning

Methods

Before PRA was used planning was done mainly through discussions (often group-based ones of a general nature); using baseline and other surveys, secondary data, visits and other unspecified forms of interaction. Heavy reliance was placed on the verification of information and records produced in this way.

After the adoption of PRA, the various PRA methods used encouraged visual analysis, more focused discussions and more field-

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[1] These workshops were undertaken as preparatory work for a proposed international research project on the perceived impact, quality and challenges facing PRA.

based interaction. This led to less emphasis being placed on secondary data and surveys, with the continued use of only a minimal baseline survey.

Forms of participation

Before the adoption of PRA, participation was perceived to be limited in the following ways:

- participation was dependent on availability (ie. those who were there at the time of the visits and surveys etc.);
- participation, in terms of planning (and the associated analysis and decision making), was forthcoming mainly from community leaders and community organisations;
- participation in planning discussions was also limited to the more articulate; and,
- for other members of the community participation took the form of contributions in cash or in kind.

After the adoption of PRA, participation was perceived by the MYRADA workshop participants to have improved, both quantitatively and qualitatively:

- the preferences and analyses of ordinary people were really considered;
- specific target groups were involved and the planning was more detailed;
- emphasis on people's management meant that MYRADA staff had to put less effort into organising and mobilising people; and,
- information exchange became more of a two-way process, where MYRADA staff informed community members about funded programmes, as well as gathering information from them for planning.

Attitudes and guiding principles

Before the adoption of PRA, MYRADA staff had more of a *"we know/they do not know"* attitude or a *"we know better/they are learners"* attitude. As a result, the knowledge, skills and experiences of community members were not really considered; people were treated as beneficiaries and information was gathered for the use of MYRADA staff. Information was not shared and planning was programme centred and initiated from the organisation.

After the adoption of PRA, the attitude amongst staff changed towards a *"we know and they know"* attitude:

- more importance was given to indigenous technical knowledge;
- emphasis was placed on building rapport with people, with a special focus on less vocal groups and *their* preferences and analysis;
- there was more awareness of the importance of *"getting closer to the facts"* as one participant put it, as well as awareness of the importance of timely and cost effective information; and,
- the relationship with community members came to be seen as more of a partnership, where community members were no longer simply seen as beneficiaries.

Documentation

Before the adoption of PRA, documentation of field visits was not systematic and took the form of written reports. After the adoption of PRA documentation became more systematic and more visual. According to one participant MYRADA now had *"pukka documentation through visuals"*.

- **Perceived impact of PRA on implementation**

Finance

Before the adoption of PRA, according to one workshop group, all financial matters were controlled by MYRADA. This included the control of funds, book-keeping, accounts, and financial monitoring.

After the adoption of PRA, the perception of several workshop groups was that monies were being transferred more to community organisations; that there was more joint

financial management and sharing of budgets; and that community organisations were also taught how to keep and maintain their own books and accounts.

Technical assistance

Before the adoption of PRA, technical assistance was perceived to be provided through the project by MYRADA staff; local contributions took the form of unskilled labour and/or cash; and there was little scope for local community contributions of knowledge and skills because these were not perceived to be valuable and useful.

After the adoption of PRA there was greater recognition of local knowledge and skills and their application to development was encouraged. More emphasis was given to enhancing local skills and knowledge through externally provided training.

Management

Before the adoption of PRA, management functions (including monitoring) were perceived to be carried out by MYRADA. Management skills were therefore also confined to organisation and project staff.

After the adoption of PRA management was perceived to have become a joint function shared with the communities. The formation of appropriate committees was encouraged, which had overall responsibility for the implementation of programmes. Local people became involved in programme appraisal and thought was given to analysing impacts and considering alternative implementation strategies.

Organisation and attitudes

Before the adoption of PRA, one guiding operational principle was, in the words of one of the workshop groups *"to make sure that programmes were implemented according to plan"*. Another guiding principle, according to the same group, was *"to implement activities with people's involvement"*.

These principles did not change after the adoption of PRA. Nevertheless, the methods for implementing these principles did change. As a result, the staff were perceived to have been more directly involved in programme implementation before the adoption of PRA. The community were perceived to have often implemented responsibilities assigned to them half-heartedly because they did not consider it their programme.

After the adoption of PRA, the following things were perceived to have changed (though not necessarily due to PRA):

- proposed activities were discussed jointly;
- budgets were prepared jointly; and,
- decisions were honoured and responsibilities were shared with the community.

• Perceived impact of PRA on evaluation

Before the adoption of PRA, the majority of evaluations were perceived to be donor driven and for their purposes. Most sector and programme evaluation was done by project staff. The role of community members in all of this was passive.

Some participants also felt that systematic evaluations were not designed, conducted or documented and that where data was evaluated, it was done mainly for the purposes of the organisation.

After the adoption of PRA, the only significant perceived impact on evaluation was that it was now carried out in communities where PRA had been used for planning purposes and involved both MYRADA staff and community members.

• Summary

The perceived impact of PRA on *planning* included greater awareness of who was involved (and encouragement of those

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formerly left out) through the use of visual methods.

The perceived impact of PRA on *implementation* included further devolution of group management and financial controls from MYRADA to the village based credit and savings groups, as well as a wider concept (and practice) of people's participation in these terms (as opposed to the contribution of labour and money).

The perceived impact of PRA on *monitoring and evaluation* was that the community was now more involved in monitoring. However, one group saw no difference before and after, in terms of evaluation, and still saw the process as being donor-driven.

• Conclusions

The workshop participants felt that PRA was only one factor contributing to all the above mentioned changes and that, even without it, there would have been changes in patterns of implementation between 1990 (when PRA was introduced) and 1994 (when the workshop was held). At least some workshop participants also felt that MYRADA had adopted participatory approaches before PRA was introduced in 1990, particularly in terms of implementation through autonomous community-based credit and savings groups.

Overall, the perceived impact of PRA on planning was the clearest and most accepted. The perceived impact of PRA on implementation was the most hotly disputed; many of the workshop participants felt that the practices employed at the time of the workshop would have come into effect even if PRA had not been adopted officially.

This raises the difficult question of cause and effect. How can we know that the changes (impacts) described above are fully or partially attributable to PRA? Except in terms of the subjective judgements, based on personal experience, that we make we cannot know with absolute conviction. Although we can seek to define and measure impacts, there will always be room for debate and argument. Indeed, what is important and interesting, in the PRA context, are these subjective opinions, as well as the differences between them.

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