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Facilitating PRA amidst war: experiences from Sierra Leone

Ann C. Hudock

• Introduction

This field report discusses some of the difficulties of facilitating PRA in conflict-ridden situations. Suggestions are made for ways facilitators can adapt their approach when working in such situations. Experiences of using PRA in Sierra Leone suggest the need for local facilitators who are acutely aware of the community and the local structures available to draw on if problems arise during the course of the PRA exercises.

This research was undertaken to further understanding of how grassroots service organisations (GSOs) assist membership organisations (MOs) with institutional development. The strategies used by the Association for Rural Development (ARD) to promote the institutional development of four MOs were examined. The MOs were selected from ARD's database of MOs registered with them. The MOs selected were based in the capital, Freetown, because travel outside this city was risky, given the internal unrest in Sierra Leone's upcountry areas. Two of the MOs selected were relatively strong organisations, having received funding for institutional development or related project activities. The other two MOs were weaker organisations, either because they had received little or no assistance, were newly formed, or lacked appropriate organisational structures to maximise the assistance they received. Efforts were also made to select at least two organisations that emphasised gender or women's issues. Using PRA approaches and methods, the research was carried out with two project officers from ARD.

War in Sierra Leone

Since 1991, war has torn apart Sierra Leone. Fighting began when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), formed in Liberia in the early 1980s to overthrow the All People's Congress (APC) government of Sierra Leone, attacked the Kailahun and Pujehun Districts. Sporadic attacks continued in these areas and gradually spread to nearby towns.

In 1992, a group of disgruntled soldiers led by a young military captain, Captain Valentine Strasser, left the war front and travelled to Freetown to demand back pay. In the process, they overthrew President Momoh's government. The captain established himself as president of Sierra Leone and installed the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) to run the state. The NPRC made three promises on the eve of its takeover: to stop the war, improve the economy and to restore the country to democratic rule. While at first the new government enjoyed enthusiastic support, particularly among the youths, disillusionment gradually set in as the fighting continued, economic conditions worsened and democratic rule looked a far off prospect.

In 1995 a coup replaced Strasser with a new leader, Brigadier Julius Amaada Bio, drawn from within the NPRC. The situation worsened and many hostages were taken. International investment declined after two foreign-owned mining companies suffered serious attacks and many senior personnel were abducted. Children, some not more than 12-years old, have also been abducted and used by the attackers. Girls are often taken as 'wives' and the boys used to carry heavy loads. Bus-loads of civilians have been ambushed en route from

the upcountry areas to Freetown, making travel along any main road dangerous.

While it is clear that the conflict has worsened, it is entirely unclear who is to blame. In the first instance, the RUF rebels are responsible for many attacks. It is possible that the RUF has splintered, and any number of breakaway factions could be operating in various areas.

Other perpetrators of the violence might be supporters of the former government, the All People's Congress. They may be interested in carrying out the attacks to create dissent and destabilize the government. Finally, bandits might also be responsible for these attacks since economic conditions have worsened since the war started, leaving many people without access to resources.

Some people tell of their village initially being attacked by rebels, and then by the government soldiers who followed. Finally, bandits took anything that the rebels or soldiers left behind so when people came out of hiding, they found nothing left in their houses or villages.

• PRA amidst paranoia

The war has devastated Sierra Leone's economy and ripped apart its social fabric. Because no one knows who is conducting these attacks, no one knows who to trust and everyone is suspect. This has destroyed the interdependence and trust that once characterised social relations in Sierra Leone. People can no longer rely on their extended family for resources or support. Even close family members might be collaborating with the rebels or informing the government soldiers. The psycho-social damage caused by the war, and the subsequent siege of fear, cannot be overstated.

Conducting PRA in these conditions presents new challenges, since such participatory learning methods are based on entering communities, spending time with them, gaining their trust, and asking them for often sensitive information. Doing this was problematic since people were extremely wary of community members, and even more vary of outsiders. Also, when people agreed to spend time sharing information, it was clear that they were distracted by the war. Conversations on any subject inevitably turned to the fighting and its consequences.

People were often unavailable for discussions since they were busy making contingency plans to flee if the situation worsened. They spent their time hoarding food, searching for cash, securing travel visas, and contacting friends and family in Banjul or Guinea to arrange to stay. Many Sierra Leoneans were themselves hosting family members who had been displaced by fighting. It was not uncommon in Freetown to find 30 or 40 people staying in already-overcrowded houses. This drained people's resources and energies.

While it was not the most opportune time to enter a community to assess its needs and priorities, and to ask people to analyse their situations, the PRA exercises seemed to provide people with a welcome release and an opportunity to vent their fear and frustrations. However, outsiders' presence served to increase people's expectations that they would receive assistance. While this is a common tension often resulting from field visits and PRA exercises, it was more pronounced in this instance since people's needs were so urgent and their situations so fragile. They had little hope of receiving assistance elsewhere.

Specifically, care had to be taken when using mapping and well-being ranking exercises (Box 1). Amidst a war where no one knows who the enemy is, the information generated by mapping is extremely sensitive. People feared that knowledge of roads in and out of the village, grain stores, key houses, etc. could fall into rebels' hands and jeopardise their safety. Moreover, they had no guarantee that the PRA facilitators were not collaborating with the rebels or were not rebels themselves. And, in a war waged on economic grounds, as opposed to ethnic or political grounds, information generated by well-being ranking was sensitive since it offered a complete picture of who held what assets. This posed a potential threat to people's security.

> **BOX 1**
> **MANAGING MAPPING AMIDST MAYHEM....**
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> On a field visit the all Sierra Leonean research team countered people's fears by relying on local structures for support. The team was contracted by a NGO to collect baseline information about communities where the NGO planned to work. Two weeks prior to the visit, the team asked the Paramount Chief of the area to contact the villages announcing their arrival. However, the Chief failed to do so since he assumed the team would be conducting a formal survey that asked relatively standard information. When the team arrived, the community agreed to work with them, but once the mapping exercise started people grew uncomfortable. The mapping was eventually halted by one of the villagers. The man said that the community could not give out such detailed information about their area and its resources since they could not be sure that the local facilitators were not rebels. The villagers, after discussing the situation among themselves, told the team that if they were really sanctioned by the Chief and doing work for an NGO, then they should return the next day with a note from the Paramount Chief's police. After this was agreed upon, the team continued with other PRA exercises but put the mapping on hold until they returned the following day with the note from the Chief's police.

The story in Box 1 illustrates the need for facilitators to understand the environment in which they are conducting PRA and to adapt their approach accordingly. In conflict situations, it becomes even more important for facilitators to be aware of increasing community expectations that they as outsiders will bring assistance. The facilitators need to take extra time to make clear, and to reiterate, the purpose of the PRA exercises. When the PRA is done solely for research and is not directly linked to development assistance, facilitators may ensure the work is less extractive by working with the community to identify external sources of support. They may also facilitate the communities' efforts to create action plans for seeking assistance, based on the community's analysis of its problems.

In conflict situations, it is important not to rush through PRA exercises and discussions since people may need time to build trust, and to vent frustrations about the conflict. This release may provide an important function in terms of processing the communities' trauma. However, while it is important not to rush, it is also important not to overburden the communities. The principle of 'optimal ignorance' applies since people are already burdened by more pressing needs, both emotional and physical.

Ultimately, facilitators must be responsive to community concerns and respect their fears, even if they initially seem unfounded. This means altering work schedules and the type of information gathered when necessary. This may mean not using certain PRA exercises, particularly mapping and well-being ranking. Conflict situations highlight the need for local PRA facilitators who understand the environment and the structures available to counter community concerns.

- **Conclusion**

Conflict situations are increasingly recognised as obstacles to the development process, rather than events occurring outside of it. The causes and effects of conflict are inextricably linked to development. Only when development programmes address the underlying roots of conflict, rather than its consequences, will they have a lasting effect. If care is taken to adapt PRA exercises to the context of conflict, they can provide a means of enhancing people's understanding of conflicts, and ensuring the appropriateness of interventions undertaken to alleviate their effects.

- **Ann C. Hudock,** Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK.