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Participatory interactions with children in Nepal

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· Introduction

ActionAid-Nepal considers children to be some of the most important beneficiaries of development programmes. Until recently the emphasis has been on education and health programmes. Now importance is given to the approach used to provide these services.

This approach lays the stress on our own attitude towards children. In order to promote their participation in development the essential requirement is to understand their lives, their roles and responsibilities, their dreams and aspirations. This means that we have to learn to listen to them and respect them. We have to look at them as our equals and not as inadequate and incapable beings. Involving children also requires consistent and conscious effort on our part to reduce the temptation to exploit the power that we as adults enjoy over children.

In 1992 ActionAid-Nepal initiated a research project with children from the district of Sinduli (Johnson *et al*, 1995). This paper describes some of the participatory methods that are subsequently being used with children from Sindhupalchok as well as from Sinduli.

· Drawing

The use of drawing as a PRA method with children confirmed that creative activities are universally popular with them. It proved to be an important tool for initiating the research process as it was easy to implement and as it effectively overcame the barriers of illiteracy and muted silence. It gave valuable insights into their minds without being too imposing. It was also something they enjoyed. It allowed them

the freedom to express views, imagination, and interpretation of the surrounding world on their own terms. Moreover, the adult-child power imbalance was relatively reduced by giving full control to the child; this in turn enhanced their confidence.

After explaining the topic, "*Best things about school*" for school-going children and "*What I do at home away from school*" for school drop-outs the children started to draw enthusiastically. Some needed guidance, while others were quite happy to copy from their neighbours.

There was not much difference in the artistic capabilities of both the groups. Most of the drawings featured things around them like the flowers, trees, sun and the river. The school-going children featured mainly the school and school-related activities. Blackboards and books were invariably depicted and most of them drew themselves playing or friends and teachers. The drop-outs drew visiting the market place and playing in the river. Some girls drew the temple.

Some drawings were difficult to decipher and interpretation was not eased by the passive nature of the participants. Some ambiguous ones could not be explained by the children themselves. However the overall response was noteworthy and proved to be an effective ice-breaker. It captivated their attention and interest for almost an hour and was a stimulus for further discussions.

· Activity profile

Ten days were spent with 10 school-going children in order to understand the economic contribution they make to their village. Initially

several visits were made to the weekly meetings held by the informal children's group which gathered together to sing, dance and perform drama. At one of these, the children were told in detail the purpose of the study and asked to choose a sample of children according to certain criteria. The sample needed to consist of 10 school-going children, boys and girls, all below the age of 16 and able to work for seven days. By the next day they had done this and had also selected four school drop-outs (two girls and two boys) as a control group. Pen and paper were then distributed to each child for diary writing.

First, an example of diary writing was given by referring to the daily work activities of one boy. The time he got up, had breakfast, lunch, and so on were noted according to his response. Then the same was requested of another boy. He hesitated to tell the exact time when he got up since he did not have a watch. Instead we decided to base the time on when the cock crowed. We then discussed the other activities performed during the day. To make it easier the children decided to divide the day into three major parts, namely - activities before lunch, activities in the afternoon and activities performed in the early evening until bed time.

After two days the children gathered and shared their problems. It was sensed that some information was lacking in their diaries. For example, some children who weave fishing nets for income while they are herding cattle had only mentioned 'herding' in their activity profile. Once they understood the value of noting such overlapping activities we agreed to meet a week later. This time when we met we discussed their income, their economic contribution, their participation in decision-making in the family and their authority over the pattern of expenditure and gender relationships.

Two boys voluntarily completed the activity profiles of non-school-going children while we did the same for two school-going children. An example of each is given in Figure 1 and 2. After this process the information was analysed, findings were presented and comments received. This exercise made the children aware of the economic contribution they make and their use of time. It also allowed the exploration of activities the children were involved in, that

would not otherwise have been valued. Moreover information could be provided in a short period by the children themselves and the relationship between us improved due to our working together.

Limitations include the fact that some children participated more than others; some (illiterate children in particular) tended to get bored with maintaining a diary.

• **Mobility maps**

Mobility maps worked well with children. Firstly, they provided information on the spatial dimension of the child's freedom. The boundary depicted in the map encompassed the places frequented by the child, which in turn said a lot about aspects of the child's life such as livelihood, workload, and surrounding physical environment (Figure 3). Secondly, the maps were useful in providing opportunities for further probing and individual interviews. The most visible difference between the school-going and the drop-outs' maps were the pictures of the schools which dominated the maps drawn by the school-going ones. Instead of the schools, the forest occupied the most space in the drawings of the school drop-outs. There were slight variations in the maps of the boys and girls. The girls included temples as well since they regularly visit them.

This tool proved effective for communicating with the children. Literacy was no barrier and of course the simplicity of the tool helped understanding and implementation.

• **Interviews**

The objectives and purpose of the interviews were explained and the children were asked to commit some time to the activity. Half of them decided they did not want to take part.

Figure 1. Time-allocation of school-going child (Sunita, 11 year old girl, Grade 5)

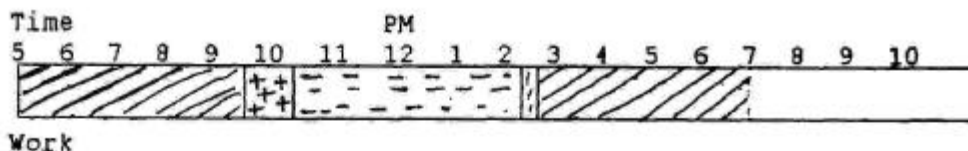
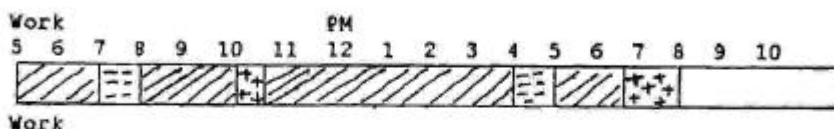


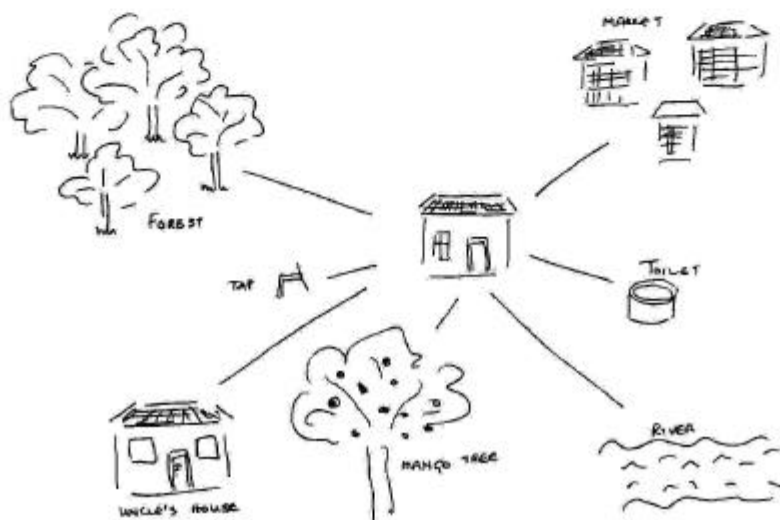
Figure 2. Time-allocation of school drop-out (Umesh, 13 year old boy)



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| | | |
| Works for Income: | Work in Home: | Time for Self: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Fishing * Fishing net weaving * "Parma" * Wage labour * (Grinding) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Water fetching * Cutting grass * Cooking * Cleaning * Brooming * Baby care * Pounding * Cattle grazing * Irrigating * Firewood collection * Ploughing * Digging * Husking grain | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Reading * Bathing * Relaxing * Eating * Sleeping * Visiting |

Figure 3. Mobillity map by Balkumari, a school drop-out



Their choice was respected since they obviously the choice they were making. Aspects such as the time and place of the meeting were left to them to decide.

An informal conversational style was used to make them feel comfortable. Ice-breakers like songs and games helped them open up. Folk songs are part of their everyday life and reveal a lot. One girl (a school drop-out) sang a song which went like this: *"girls and boys are like the two eyes of a person, it is the parents to blame if they don't send them to school"*.

The findings from the other methods provided leads to follow up. It was necessary to have many sessions since the children became restless quickly and have other interests. We found it important to avoid difficult words and use local phrases whenever possible. Questions have to be as simple as possible and linked to things they are familiar with. Conversations usually flowed at their own pace with only subtle manoeuvring and probing needed from the interviewer. Recording was done by writing since tape-recording made the children suspicious and self-conscious, and some were more interested in the machines than in the questions.

Group interviews worked well for getting general information. The security of being in a group gave most of the children confidence to voice their opinion. In one session when we were talking about *"What I would like to become when I grow up"*, the children's aspirations varied according to their educational status. Most of the school-going ones had ambitions like becoming a teacher, a doctor, a pilot, whereas three drop-outs said they would like to work in the fields or make beaten rice. They also had aspirations for their future but these were not very different from what they are doing now, or what their parents are doing.

It is equally important to interview parents and teachers in order to understand the children better. Most parents tended to blame their children for losing interest and quitting school. It was only after much discussion that some felt comfortable enough to talk about the reality of poverty that does not allow them the luxury of education. The teachers said that because of the work-load at home the children do not study

enough. This results in poor performances and eventually failing class.

• Conclusions

The effectiveness of the use of PRA methods with children depends a lot on the context, implementation, and the team composition. Like in other research, ethical issues, such as ensuring that their informed consent is given, confidentiality is maintained and that findings are disseminated, need to be heeded.

Triangulation is particularly important. Rather than using a single method in isolation it is better to supplement the research with more than one method in order to cross-check the validity of the information collected. For example the drawings showed what they did away from school, and the mobility maps gave information on their movements, the places they frequented, and all these were further discussed in the interviews with children, parents and teachers.

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