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Process observation in PRA: guidelines and reflections

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• Expansion of PRA

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) is increasingly used. In the process of contributing to growth and development, PRA itself is undergoing significant evolution as it is put to use by a multitude of agencies from villagers to World Bank officials.

• Significance of process observation

The growth and spread of PRA has precipitated much debate. Recently, concern has centred on the way in which methodologies are employed and the quality of PRA. One response to this, which is the focus of this article, is process observation.

Process observation is a method of documenting, reflecting on and evaluating the implementation of PRA. It is a critical component in PRA exercises for it:

• provides immediate feedback;
• maintains the quality of PRA work;
• enables the practitioners to adhere to the principles and values of PRA;
• builds confidence among the members of the PRA team;
• helps improve the existing methods and promote methodological innovation; and,
• helps to explore the accuracy, reliability and replicability of the information gathered and shared.

To date, process observation has received little attention. But good practice and principles, such as openness, flexibility, adaptability and improvisation of methods, depend on critical reflection by practitioners. The quality of PRA and its credibility will be improved if the process is observed, reflected upon and learning experiences fed back into practice. It is our experience that a PRA practitioner should never forget that each PRA session is a new learning experience.

• Task of the process observer

A process observer is generally asked to observe and note down events, incidents and transactions that occur in the course of gathering and sharing information. Based on this, he or she prepares a report that is shared among the team members during in-house sessions.

But we have often observed that the process observer may fail to grasp what is expected of his or her role. Their reports are often too lengthy with a lot of unnecessary details and very little scope for improving ourselves as PRA practitioners.

Thus, we feel that a process observer should have more explicit objectives on what to observe during a PRA exercise. We present below guidelines and checklists that may be helpful for a process observer.

• Guidelines for the process observer

The process observer has to look at the process from three angles, namely: atmosphere-based, team-based and people-based.

could assemble? Is there any place-specific barrier to assembling and discussing?

- What are the seating positions? Who seem to occupy superior places?

Team-based

- Is there 'role-reversal' (such as outsiders acting as learners, or villagers as teachers)?
- Is there any 'role confusion' and 'role change' among the team members, or do they play their assigned roles correctly and effectively?
- Is there 'rushing' or is the learning process gradual and progressive?
- Is there coherence between successive questions, or are they jumbled?
- Does the facilitator or interviewer establish contact with every participant, or does he or she focus on only a few active informants?
- Is there adequate probing and cross-checking of information?
- Are the 'six helpers' in PRA (what, when, where, who, why and how) adequately and continuously used?
- Is the information generated triangulated, cross checked and substantiated?
- Is the facilitator sensitive to the needs of the group?
- Is the discussion too lengthy?
- Is 'shoulder-tapping' done whenever necessary? (i.e. are team members sensitively reminding each other of the need to take a listening attitude)
- Is there a natural starting and natural withdrawal? Are 'chance encounters' (e.g. during a transect) made use of or ignored?
- Does the team share the information with the villagers?
- Is there any language barrier?

People-based

- What is the mix of participants (are they young, old, men, women, rich, poor or mixed)?
- Which local people appear to be excluded from the process?
- What is the 'outsider' to 'villager' ratio?
- Do the villagers do, say, show and map with natural involvement and willingness, or with reluctance and because they are asked to?
- Are materials used in the exercises which are locally available?

- ## Final tips for the process observer

Have the people changed through the process of PRA? This is an important question that is posed to PRA practitioners.

To answer this question, the process observer should be able to identify different stages through which the group passes. He or she should have a 'third eye and a second hand' to observe and note the changes in the behaviour of the villagers towards the outsiders in successive visits.

Broadly, we distinguish five stages through which a well-facilitated group pass:

Rapport

- Is there transparency in the relationships between the village group and the outside team?

Confidence gaining

- Has the village group gained adequate confidence on the motives and purposes expressed by the outside team?
- Have the outsiders enabled the villagers to gain confidence in themselves - in their own analysis and interpretation of the situation and events?

Self-appreciation

- Has the process of PRA paved the way for a self-appreciation, by the villagers, of their own analysis and interpretation of the situation and events?

Capacity building and empowerment

- Does the process enable capacity building and empowerment, or is it superficial?

Action

- Does the PRA process tend to initiate action or merely enable the outsiders to deliver a fine speech, roll up the information charts drawn by the villagers and quietly leave once and for all?
- Have the outside team raised the expectations and exceeded the scope of the PRA, or have they empowered people to facilitate their own change?

• Conclusion

As PRA practitioners, these guidelines should help us to focus on where we have failed to follow the basic philosophy of PRA. A continuous and critical reflection on the process would enable us to handle the PRA methods with ease, confidence and ingenuity and enable us to feed back analysis with practice. This should enhance the quality of PRA.

Process observation is an important component of PRA, yet it is a difficult task. The person who observes the process has an all-absorbing role to play. He or she must be an intense, patient listener and a keen observer of PRA methodologies and principles.

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