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The timing dilemma

Million Gebreyes, with a response by Parmesh Shah

• Introduction

I would like to present a brief account of an irrigation development project undertaken in the Western Gojam, Ethiopia. During this study, I realised some of the problems one could encounter in the practical application of PRA. To this end, I will focus this paper on the timing of the consultation process with potential 'beneficiaries' of a development project. Should we be open and tell people about the nature of the study? If so, when should consultation occur? At the beginning, as we have done in this project, or at the end?

• Project

The objective of the study was two-fold:

- To undertake a feasibility study for the development of 16000 hectares of land in the Birr and Koga River sub-basins.
- To prepare an overall catchment-wide development plan for the two sub-basins.

The project entails the inundation of vast areas of grazing and cropland to construct reservoirs in two areas: Birr and Koga. It was estimated that up to 2000 hectares of land could be inundated in Koga and twice that much in Birr. As a result of the inundation, there is a need to relocate a large number of families from the proposed reservoir area to the potential irrigated area which is located near by.

The study has taken about two years and was completed recently. It used a multidisciplinary approach drawing on a team of technical and social advisors. One of the exercises was to conduct a socio-economic survey using PRA in

combination with a structured questionnaire. The main objective of the survey was to understand the attitudes of the potential beneficiaries towards the proposed irrigation and catchment development.

Focus group discussions, with local people from different Peasant Associations located in the project area, were an important tool to establish dialogue between advisors and local people. The advisors' role was to discuss the proposed development with local people since it is they who will eventually receive the best or worst end of the deal.

In most of the Peasant Associations, especially in Birr catchment area where prior irrigation experience exists, the discussions were conducted smoothly. Resistance and defiance to the project objectives came from Peasant Associations in Koga, the proposed reservoir area. In this catchment area there is no prior irrigation experience and the resistance to the project was strong. The majority of household refused to listen to or co-operate with the advisors and project staff. Some farmers even tried to intimidate and attacked the project staff. By the time the reservoir area farmers rebelled against the study, the study exercise was in its second phase. This phase required a lot of field work, including soil testing and a topographic survey, but it was not completed because of local resistance.

At this point the project staff divided into two groups. One group felt the study team were right in explaining project objectives to farmers. The other group, mainly composed of technical advisors, were opposed to the frankness. They felt that the study project would be suspended because of the farmers' reactions.

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The study did continue, albeit with some coercion by the local administration. It has now been completed but the social issues continue to be the main challenges for the continuing appraisal, design and implementation periods.

• **Reflections**

Confusion emerged and the project was impeded through being open with people from the beginning about the projects' outputs. The question remains: Should we have refrained from telling the people about the project's objective until technical field studies, such as the soil survey, had been completed? In this way, we would have avoided popular resistance to our presence. Therein lies the dilemma: the technical people didn't want openness at the beginning until their part of field study was finalised. By contrast, the social scientists favoured openness at a very early stage of the study to ensure the participation of the people.

My experiences suggest that it is best to have a consensus on the methodologies and way to conduct the study prior to starting. While many of the staff, including both technical and non-technical advisors, believe in the merits of participation, these principles were over-ridden during this study. But I think that if we believe in consultation with local people to ensure project sustainability, then we must have participation. Whether the consultation should be at the beginning or at the end of a study period remains a moot point.

I would like to use *PLA Notes* as a forum to invite all those interested, especially field level practitioners, to discuss the timing of the consultation process in participatory project development.

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• **The timing dilemma: a response by Parmesh Shah**

Many large scale development programmes have been designed and implemented without adequate consultation with communities. Most development programmes involve gainers and

losers. PRA and other participatory approaches have played an important part in facilitating negotiations between different stakeholders. They have also enabled people to bargain and negotiate with other stakeholders and the government.

If the initial appraisal process indicates loss of income and livelihoods for one group, there is a need for extended dialogue with different groups in the community. There is no short cut approach in such situations other than discussing alternative options with communities. This should include an explanation of the rehabilitation option, enabling people to appraise their alternatives. This requires sensitive and patient facilitation.

Million mentions the timing dilemma. I feel that the problem is not just with the use of PRA. Transparency is a very important aspect of the participatory process. The facilitators and the practitioners should always be up front and frank about the objective of any appraisal process with the communities. Most people in the village community are already disillusioned with outsiders and so do not trust them. By being frank, facilitators and the institutions build better rapport and are able to facilitate negotiations between various stakeholders on complex problems with a reasonable chance of a compromise solution.

In our experience, if external agencies are manipulative, not transparent from the outset and have already decided the objectives without consulting the people (as appears in this case), people see through the game and react negatively (e.g. by beating staff) and sabotage the implementation of such programmes. It is pointless to do complex and costly technical appraisal and planning unless people see the need to pursue this option and it is socially feasible to implement a programme. In summary, I suggest *'be up front with the communities about the objectives and purpose of the appraisal: allow them the space to evaluate appraise and negotiate different options'*.

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