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## Participation, policy and institutionalisation An overview

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### • Introduction

Over a five day period, more than 70 PRA practitioners from over 30 countries, representing a range of government and non-government agencies and a cross-section of disciplines, took part in two related workshops at the Institute of Development Studies, UK (13-17 May 1996). The theme of the workshops was participation, policies and institutions. The aim of these twin events was to take stock of current trends, review best practice, and explore how recent participatory initiatives have led to policy changes and the transformation of organisational systems, structures, procedures and cultures.

This section of *PLA Notes* includes some of the key papers presented at the two workshops and draws out some of the main conclusions of the working group discussions. Demonstrating a more general interest in policy and institutions, this section also includes papers on these themes which were submitted independently to *PLA Notes* (see articles by Warner et al., Wilkie and Nacionales, and Steinich in this issue).

In *PLA Notes* 24, Victoria Johnson encouraged those engaged in field level PRA work 'to consider how this does or does not, and can or can not, influence policies. It is in the influencing of policies that lasting changes can be brought about'. She also suggested that linking PRA field research to external policy work 'must be coupled with an internal process of understanding and capacity building'. This is the institutionalisation of PRA: the process by which organisations, and individuals working within them, adapt themselves to facilitate and promote participatory learning at all levels. The collection of papers in this issue suggest that the

policy environment and institutional culture within which PRAs are undertaken are important factors that influence, if not determine, the long term success, sustainability and replication of participatory processes.

### • Participatory approaches and policy change

The first workshop examined the influence of participatory approaches on policy formulation and implementation. One question that emerged is how appraisals undertaken to explore policy related issues can be participatory. Many of the papers noted that few (if any) benefits accrue to local people through undertaking these appraisals.

Policy formulation is a lengthy process. Direct benefits from policy change are only likely to accrue in the long term. During appraisal, information is more likely to be extracted from local communities than shared. Policy-related research tends to be more of a 'one-off event' than a process of dialogue. Furthermore, the agenda for discussion is clearly set by outsiders. Thus, policy-related appraisals tend to be more RRA than PRA. Many of the authors discuss their use of either term in the context of their study. This reflects different perspectives and the specific circumstances under which the studies were taken.

The emerging themes from the policy workshop can be summarised into three main areas:

- The use of RRA and PRA to inform policy;

- the use of RRA and/or PRA to help local people understand how policy changes affect them; and,
- the use of PRA to link local people better to the process of policy formulation.

### **RRA/PRA to inform policy**

There are two main ways in which participatory approaches can help to inform policy. Firstly, RRA can diversify perspectives and help focus the policy debate to local realities. Secondly, including policymakers in an RRA team can be an effective way of exposing them to local people's realities.

Karen Schoonmaker Freudenberger's article draws on her experiences from Madagascar and Guinea where both these approaches were used. She notes that the information obtained through RRAs helped to ground the policy in real world issues. However, because these studies are usually carried out in a few communities, policymakers may choose to disregard the information on which it is based. It is difficult to convince those who are entrenched in the idea of sampling frames of the benefits of information gathered using RRA.

This is why involving policymakers in the research process is such an advantage. They are more likely to understand the data and be able to defend its use within an organisation. A number of articles support this view (e.g. Pimbert et al., Box 3), suggesting that the experiential learning gained through RRA enables policymakers to accept and value the diversity of views that may be raised.

It is important to note that the results from RRA in a few communities should not be directly extrapolated to a larger population. Rather, RRA provides the context and sets the framework for the policy debate. It demonstrates the diversity of local situations which policy should be able to take into account. The challenge for policy makers is to strive for socially-inclusive policy that incorporates this diversity and is more responsive to the needs of those people who have traditionally been marginalised.

The use of PRA/RRA to inform policy has also been the main aim of the World Bank-

sponsored Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs, see Box 1). Tony Dogbe's article describes in detail a PPA in Ghana. This article suggests that PPAs increase local capacity in participatory research. However, they failed to build progressively on the information gained, consolidate learning and follow-up sufficiently on the PRA findings.

Many of the papers, including those on PPAs, emphasise that it is difficult to link RRA or PRA directly to a change in policy. Policy making is often an opaque, complex, non-linear process. There are many influencing factors. It is difficult to identify the impact that any particular study or event has had on the decision-making process. However, there are often other 'spin-off' benefits from participatory research, such as capacity building. These are discussed in many of the papers (see, for example, articles by Tony Dogbe and Karen Schoonmaker Freudenberger).

### **PRA to explain policy to local people**

Markus Steinich's article shows how PRA can be used to present complex policy changes to local people. He describes how local people can explore their relationship with a range of institutions that impact upon their lives. He uses interaction diagrams to bring people into an institutional change debate and enable a local evaluation of various organisations.

### **Linking local people to policy formulation**

The ultimate goal of participatory approaches is to ensure that local people have a say in policies that affect them. The article by Michel Pimbert et al. on human/wildlife interactions highlights the grim results of policy making uninformed by local people. In two protected areas in India, local people were excluded, depriving them of their livelihood base. National Park policy making was simplified by excluding people but its implementation was more complex because local people were angered by the process. In this case, the policy making process continues. Joint management agreements are now being developed between the government agencies, conservation agencies and local people.

## BOX 1

**PARTICIPATORY POVERTY ASSESSMENTS**

Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) are rapid, qualitative assessments, promoted by the World Bank and supported by national governments. They are designed to gather poor people's perceptions of key issues related to poverty reduction. The premise is that involving poor people in the analysis will ensure that the strategies identified for poverty alleviation will reflect their concerns, include their priorities and identify the obstacles to development.

PPAs have been carried out in a wide range of countries in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and especially Africa. Participants at the IDS workshop heard five detailed reports of experiences with PPAs, four in Africa (Ghana, Zambia, South Africa and Mozambique) and one from the Caribbean (Jamaica), as well as insights from several other country cases. As these case studies made clear, all of the PPAs conducted to date have been diverse in both objectives and outcome, but they do share certain common attributes, including:

- enriching the poverty profile through illustrating dimensions of the experience of poverty and vulnerability which conventional poverty studies based on statistical analyses tend to ignore;
- expanding the understanding of the impact of public expenditures and services on the poor through eliciting their perceptions on the accessibility and relevance of social and economic services;
- illustrating the constraints faced by different social groups when trying to take up market-based opportunities;
- contributing to policy formulation through outlining the impact of restrictive regulations on poor households and groups;
- understanding appropriate public policy on 'social safety nets' for vulnerable groups by examining local experiences in the operation of formal and informal social support systems;
- illustrating the capacities of poor people to act independently through local organisations.

PPAs have helped senior decision makers to recognise the importance of including qualitative information in their analysis of poverty. Bank officials and government decision makers treat seriously the data gathered through the PPAs. As a result, this information has helped to shape the development of key policy documents. Beyond that, however, there has been a sporadic commitment to follow-up, attitudinal shifts or institutional capacity strengthening in the countries where the PPAs have been undertaken. Consequently, the inclusion of all stakeholders and the follow-up at all levels (within the World Bank, with policy makers and poor people) has remained limited.

Michael Warner et. al. show how information gathered using PRA can be presented in a form that is coherent to policymakers. Drawing on ideas from conflict resolution and environmental impact assessment, the authors describe the 'Conflict Analysis Framework'. It is a method of linking information gained from PRA with local people to the policy formulation process.

The article also describes the use of community action proposals (CAPs) which are designed 'to address the problem of policy-based PRAs raising false short-term expectations'. They 'seek to bring rapid and tangible benefits to the participating communities'. CAPs are local project activities that are identified during the

Conflict Analysis Framework. They are projects that the community can undertake with limited resources and support.

**Mechanisms for influencing policy through PRA**

Many of the papers provided insights into effective approaches for influencing policy to become more participatory. Anil Shah describes the role that NGOs can play in influencing public policy. He suggests that entering the policy arena is important for NGOs as it enables them to encourage governments to streamline bureaucracy and facilitate bottom-up development processes.

However, he is realistic about the difficulties of influencing policy. He describes the policy arena as a 'full bus': policy makers are pre-occupied, busy and are bombarded by a plethora of lobbyists. One needs, therefore, to be very strategic in the way that policy change is targeted. His article outlines in detail the

steps that are required. This is also illustrated in Box 2 which describes a Ugandan NGO's experiences with influencing policy changes for more participatory health care. It demonstrates the protracted negotiations that occur prior to policy changes.

**BOX 2**

**EXPERIENCES IN POLICY INFLUENCING, UGANDA**

In early 1992, debate began on how to make the Primary Ministry of Health Care (PHC) more comprehensive with greater emphasis on community participation. A small Inter-Ministerial/Agency task force was established, comprising key officials from various ministries, local government, UNICEF and an NGO, the Uganda Community Based Health Care Association (UCBHCA).

Their remit was to draft a National Strategy Document and guidelines for Community Participation in primary health care. This was completed and presented to the Government at the end of 1993. However a long period elapsed before the final document was finalised. This phase involved consultative meetings, short workshops, waiting for comment from senior level policymakers and advisors, dialoguing, correspondence and re-drafting work.

The rather long period of waiting for final approval was characterised by uncertainty and a need to re-confirm the facts, processes and procedures proposed. Many people feared the unknown implications of the guidelines. The top bureaucrats were worried that a step towards active community participation and empowerment would result in their loss of power.

Formal and informal lobbying and advocacy culminated in the publication and final approval of two main Government of Uganda Health Policy documents:

The Three Year Health Plan Frame 1993 - 1996 (officially recognised NGOs as key partners in health care delivery)

The National Guidelines for Community Participation in Primary Health Care, 1993 (provided justification for community participation and ways of ensuring it within the health care system).

Lessons learned:

effective policy influencing requires patience and persistence;

alliances should be formed with other lobbying groups and reconciliatory rather than confrontational approaches should be used at all times.

Action plan for the future:

maintain existing close working relations with all related organisations;

build the capacity of government and NGO staff in participatory learning approaches.

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## · Institutionalisation of participatory approaches

For over a decade, participatory research and development approaches have proven their efficacy for local development. Whatever type of organisation employs them, participatory approaches have implications for management style, operating procedures and organisational culture. Participatory approaches are now being adopted by large, government bureaucracies, donor agencies, development banks, large NGOs and universities. Such scaling up offers tremendous opportunities for expanding the active involvement of poor people in major development and research programmes. At the same time, however, there is also a real risk of misuse and abuse as approaches and methods that have been used at the local level move into the mainstream.

The scaling up of participatory approaches is occurring at such a rapid rate that there has been little opportunity for research and learning on its implications. The second IDS workshop focused on best practice for institutionalising participatory approaches to development.

## · Issues

### Scaling up and scaling down

We need to recognise that the adoption and institutionalisation of participatory approaches may have implications not only for large organisations, but also for local groups and community-based organisations on the ground. We need to learn how to scale down to meet local needs while applying on a large scale.

Kamal Kar and Sue Phillips describe their experiences of institutionalising participatory approaches in the slum improvement projects in India. Their article highlights the risks of standardisation that can occur when scaling up. It also demonstrates how follow-up activities can easily be neglected, so that PRA remains at the appraisal stage. Their article suggests 'scaling down' to success stories where the PRA is not an end in itself but leads to project activities. The article also outlines their experiences of innovative and experiential

learning by allowing slum dwellers to describe directly their life to project staff.

Larry Nacionales and Maxwell Wilkie describe the experiences of a European Union project in Guimaras Province, the Philippines. They outline the efforts made by the project to avoid the standardisation of PRA in scaling up participatory approaches to the provincial level.

### Lack of quality assurance

Nilanjana Mukherjee describes the process of incorporating participatory approaches into the nation-wide system for development planning in Indonesia. This article outlines the real problems of maintaining high quality participatory learning within a system of tight deadlines and national planning structures. In this environment, 'participation' became manipulative, coercive and regimented.

It remains very difficult to assure quality in training, practice or promotion, as there are no commonly held standards on which to judge performance (see Box 3). Anybody can claim to be an 'expert' in participatory approaches and there is no sure way to determine his/her authenticity until after the work is done. As participatory approaches are institutionalised and applied on a large scale, there can be a drift towards standardisation and a loss of quality.

Somesh Kumar reviews a recent workshop in Bangalore. This addressed many quality issues through its focus on the 'Attitude and Behaviour Changes' that should accompany PRA. The workshop suggested ways in which training, institutionalisation and scaling up of participatory approaches can ensure that appropriate attitudes and behaviour are prominent. The workshop culminated in an appeal to donors and governments to "take a close, careful and self-critical look" at the importance of creating the mechanisms which support appropriate attitudes and behaviour and ensure "true and lasting participation". It is reproduced in this issue of *PLA Notes*.

### Contradictory donor policies

Participatory approaches are extremely popular among donors who remain interested in saving money and achieving tangible results quickly. These approaches are increasingly included in

terms of reference and project guidelines, whether appropriate or not. Some donors have begun to push their programmes and projects to use PRA or work 'in a PRA-like manner', without necessarily understanding the implications of what this entails<sup>1</sup>. Donors of NGOs have also been rushing to do the same.

Unfortunately, many continue to set short-term physical 'targets' (e.g. kilometres of rural roads built, hectares of irrigated land rehabilitated, etc.) and use financial indicators (e.g., amount of allocated funds spent in Financial Year X) as measures of success. At the moment, institutions are attempting to adopt participatory approaches without changing their existing operational procedures.

This makes it difficult for programmes to employ participatory approaches appropriately, as they are still expected to initiate viable - and visible - projects almost as soon as funds are allocated. Project money is spent on infrastructure and other capital improvements to show results quickly and ensure the continued flow of funds in future years. Furthermore, most project proposals and budgets are written prior to understanding or exploring the needs and priorities of local people. Such contradictory policies are pulling public agencies in opposite directions.

### **Bureaucratic inertia**

There are clear cases of institutional resistance among some agencies to an approach whose outcomes cannot be predicted. Some of these obstacles are structural: top-down systems have difficulty handling a bottom-up approach. Some are professional: some agency staff view participatory approaches as too demanding (in terms of personal commitments and human resource investments), too challenging and, therefore, too professionally risky. They want to know the answers before they begin working on the problems. With an open-ended, iterative, participatory approach, knowing the answers

before you start is - or should be - an impossibility.

### **Mechanistic applications**

Linked to the previous two items is the rigid, mechanistic and unimaginative way some institutions are now applying participatory approaches. Simply because an institution has made a policy decision to employ a participatory approach does not necessarily mean that it is using it in a responsive, dynamic and flexible manner. This is exemplified in the article by Kamal Kar and Sue Phillips where PRAs were rigidly applied from 9 - 10 am each day!

All too frequently, 'participatory' approaches are being applied within rigid, top-down, standardised frameworks that constrict decision-making, limit the range of possible development or research options, and, ultimately, diminish the effectiveness of the efforts. The focus is on *product* (i.e., measurable results) rather than on *process* (i.e., the manner and means of achieving those results). This holds true for both training and field practice.

### **Lack of capacity to strengthen capacity**

The demand for participatory training support, training materials and teaching aids is growing rapidly. Unfortunately, there are few agencies anywhere in the world with the capacity to strengthen other institutions' capacities in the training and application of participatory approaches on any significant scale. This leads to the few qualified agencies becoming overwhelmed by requests for assistance. Moreover, various 'expert' consultants and institutions step in to meet this training demand, sometimes with disastrous consequences

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<sup>1</sup> Without deriding the attempts of donors to embrace and apply participatory approaches, few of them recognize that you do not 'do' a PRA. All participatory approaches must be seen as part of a broader *process* of institutional reorientation and transformation, not simply a collection of 'tools' to be applied by external consultants for gathering information quickly.

BOX 3  
REFLECTIONS ON PRA IN ETHIOPIA

I share my experiences of how PRA is learned, internalised and diffused within an institution. It is based on my experiences with Save the Children Fund, Ethiopia.

PRA is not easy to spread successfully. In terms of maximising the policy and institutional impact, PRA should be adopted through senior managers, planners and policy makers. These people influence the processes of adopting and diffusing the practice of PRA. PRA reports read by unenlightened decision makers are likely to be dismissed as of doubtful quality. Those who have been trained in PRA will understand much better how it was prepared and appreciate its value. Moreover, the spread of PRA may be hastened because it is supported by higher levels.

But, how much emphasis is given in trainings for attitude and behavioural changes? The easiest part of PRA is teaching its tools, e.g maps and chapatti diagrams. The most difficult part is teaching the fundamental principles which demand a change in behaviour and attitude. How much can people change long standing behaviours over the course of a training event? I fear that PRA may be hijacked as development discourse. We may speak PRA while doing different things. The current demand for PRA is as high as the price of trainers/facilitators. A quality-controlled training approach is required: short trainings cannot change attitudes in the long term. Without change, poorly facilitated and performed PRAs might result in incorrect analyses and conclusions.

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This can lead to disillusionment and frustration on the part of some agencies. They expect to 'scale up' the new participatory approach quickly because they soon encounter this shortage of skilled trainer-practitioners.

### The search for shortcuts

Participatory approaches are not substitutes for thorough preparation, long-term planning, constructive dialogue and sustained interaction. Yet many agencies naively assume that a single, brief, participatory exercise with a group of local people will lead to positive and lasting change. What is abundantly clear is that *no* participatory approach offers a quick solution to complex problems; there is no shortcut to success.

The first participatory encounter between an external enabling agency and a local community should be seen as a beginning, not an end in itself. It is the start of a long, complicated, but mutually beneficial journey of joint analysis, self-critical awareness (for both insiders and outsiders), capacity strengthening, resource mobilisation and, ideally, the initiation of a sustainable development process.

### NOTE

The IDS workshop papers are currently being compiled into two books which should be published in the near future. One book focuses on the PRA and policy theme '*Whose voice?*' and the other on institutionalisation of participatory approaches '*Who changes?*'. For further information on the workshops, papers or books, please contact: Jenny Skepper, IDS, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK.

### REFERENCES

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