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Sharing our experiences: an appeal to donors and governments

• Introduction

We are an informal group of trainers and practitioners who are struggling to evolve, promote and disseminate participatory approaches in development. Most of us come from countries in the South. For ten days we have shared our experiences of participation and of PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) training and practice (see article by Somesh Kumar, this issue). We have reviewed what we have learnt through working with local people, especially the poor and marginalised, and with communities and Government organisations, donors and NGOs in our different countries and varied contexts.

• Participation and PRA

PRA is continuously evolving and spreading in many ways. It can now be described as a philosophy, approach and set of behaviour and attitudes, together with the methods with which it is associated. The philosophy stresses self-critical awareness and commitments to the poor, weak and vulnerable. The approach, behaviour and attitudes are facilitating, seeking to empower by enabling people to enhance their knowledge of their condition and lives, and to take more control by analysing, planning, acting, and monitoring and evaluating.

The methods are open-ended, participatory, and often visual as well as verbal. PRA processes have now been facilitated in many contexts, rural and urban, and in almost every domain of development.

As trainers and practitioners of PRA, we know we are continuously learning and that our common understanding will continue to evolve. We find, though, that our experiences have so

much in common, and suggest urgent and important lessons. This compels us to appeal to donors and governments. We urge all those concerned at all levels to recognise the need for radical but practical change.

We hope that what follows will be widely read and reflected on. We believe that participation in development is at a crucial stage - calling for decisive action.

We welcome the efforts to mainstream participation in multilateral and bilateral agencies and in international NGOs, and the increasing stress on participation by Governments and Government departments. Participation has become a requirement in most donor-supported projects, and is more and more stressed in Government programmes. This has led to some good results.

Much more common, though, has been abuse and bad practice. This has occurred on a huge scale. Again and again, in different countries and contexts, with different donors and Governments, we have found dependency created and participation destroyed by:

- Pressures to scale up PRA rapidly, sometimes to a national level;
- Demand for instant PRA training one-off and on a large scale;
- Low quality PRA training, limited to routine methods;
- The rush to prepare projects and programmes;
- Top-down procedures;
- Drives to disburse funds;
- Time-bound targets for products, neglecting process;
- Inflexible programmes and projects;
- Neglect and underestimation of the knowledge and capabilities of local people;

- Neglect of local capacity building and institutional development;
- Lack of staff continuity;
- Penalisation of participatory staff, and above all; and,
- Failure to recognise the 'ABC', the attitude and behaviour change of PRA - primacy of personal behaviour.

• **Attitude and behaviour change**

In these circumstances, the very priority and urgency given to participation and PRA have been self-defeating. The tragedy is that most donors and Governments either do not realise this, or do not act on the implications. We appeal to them to take a close, careful and self-critical look at the reality, to recognise what happens, and to reverse top-down practices and behaviour. We believe that only then can true and lasting participation and empowerment be achieved.

Participation as a way of life

We have found that participation and PRA are a philosophy, a way of life, and a set of behaviour and attitudes. These apply at all levels and in all organisations - donor, Government, NGO, CBO - and in all contexts - office, community and home. Contradictions between the values promoted in communities and those practised in organisations lead to conflicts and diminish or destroy participation.

It is not only villagers and slum-dwellers who have to be empowered, but also field workers and others at the lower levels of organisations. It is not only the behaviour and attitudes of junior staff which have to become participatory and non-dominating, but also those of their superiors.

Personal behaviour and attitudes

Personal behaviour and attitudes have been the missing link in development, and can now be seen as the key. Personal change is the first step in institutional change. This applies as powerfully to the head of an international agency as to a field worker in a remote village. Participation cannot be commanded in an authoritarian top-down manner. To facilitate participation at the community and group level requires that the culture, values and procedures

of the Government or NGO organisations, and of donors where they are involved, themselves be participatory.

In PRA, the tools have received much attention. By showing how local people can express, present and analyse their complex and detailed realities, they can help to change the attitudes and beliefs of outsiders. It is, the outsiders' personal behaviour and attitudes that are more fundamental than the methods. In particular, PRA stresses:

- Self-critical awareness of one's behaviour, biases and shortcomings;
- Commitment to the poor, weaker and vulnerable;
- Respecting others;
- Not interrupting, not lecturing, but being a good, active listener;
- Not hiding, but embracing error;
- 'Handing over the stick', meaning passing the initiative and responsibility to others;
- 'They can do it', meaning empowering others through confidence in their capabilities; and,
- Open-ended flexibility to make space for the priorities of the poor.

Our experience has been that when this behaviour is encouraged, and when institutional cultures transform to permit and reward them, many obstacles to participation and empowerment are removed. Personally, the experience can also be deeply satisfying.

An appeal for action

In the light of the above, we urge all donors and Governments to adopt and implement these policies and practices:

- Endorse the primacy of personal behaviour and attitudes. This applies in all organisations involved - donor, Government, NGO, CBO and consultant, and at all levels. Encourage staff to interact in a participatory and non-dominating modes in their official and private lives. Change personnel evaluations to recognise and reward participatory behaviour and attitudes.
- Provide face-to-face learning experiences for staff at all levels through interaction with local people, especially the poor and marginalised. Organise PRA exposure for

senior staff. Reward those who take this up. Make opportunities for poor people to present their realities freely to those in power.

- Don't rush. Take time. Allow much more time for the early stages of projects, to give space for local, community and group-level institutional development. Time and commitment are essential for the full participation, identification of priorities and planning by local people, especially women, the poor and the marginalised. This requires more funding for staff and training, less for hardware.
- Be flexible. Do not allow top-down logic to generate 'participatory' blueprints which only masquerade as participatory. Instead start and continue with open-ended PRA processes and flexible funding for empowerment, diversity and local control. Use PRA processes to enable people, especially the poor, to express and achieve their priorities. Do not be alarmed but welcome a project change through participation.
- Stress process and qualitative change, not targets and products. Local institution building for sustainability, empowerment of poor people, women and the marginalised, and new confidence among the weak usually matter much more than physical outputs. See process itself as a product.
- Engage PRA trainers who stress attitude and behaviour change, and reject those who stress only the methods.
- Assure continuity and sustain commitment to PRA and participation, at all levels in donor agencies, among political leaders, among senior staff, with field staff, and with PRA trainers. Avoid one-off training without follow-up. PRA requires long-term commitment of staff and resources to take root and be effective. Take a long-term view of changes in institutional culture which may require sustained effort for a decade or more. Ensure that donor staff, policy-makers and field staff alike have at least 3 to 5 years in the same post.
- Work to change the culture, procedures and interactions in donor and government organisations, and NGOs. Participation starts where the buck stops. Participatory management and interactions at all levels are needed to support and sustain participation in the field. Each one of us, wherever we are - in donor agencies, in governments, or in

NGOs - can form alliances with and support those seeking change in theirs.

The spirit of this appeal

We present this statement not in a spirit of superiority or moralising, but as what we have learnt the hard way. We have ourselves made many mistakes in our development work, and will surely continue to do so. But we believe that what we have learnt recently about participation, and especially about the primacy of behaviour and attitudes, is so important that we have an obligation to share it.

For us it is an empirical finding that if participation is to be more than rhetoric, those who advocate it must live it. The implication is long, sustained processes of personal, institutional and professional change for us all, an agenda for the 21st century. We urge all Governments and donors to start now, and to reinforce and support each other in the processes of change.

We hope that this appeal will be widely read, reflected on and acted on; and we invite others to amend and add to what we have said here so that together we can all learn to do better.

Abu Hena Mallik, Farhana Faruqi, Fiona Hinchcliffe, G.B. Adhikari, Gemechu Gedeno, Haryo Habirano, James Mascarenhas, John Devavaram, Kamal Kar, Kamal Phuyal, Lars Johansson, Mallika R. Samaranayake, N. Narayansamy, Neela Mukherjee, P.V. Satheesh, Rashida Dohad, Robert Chambers, S. Rangasamy, Saiti Makuku, Sansen Ramos, Shashigo Gerbu, Sheelu Francis, Shen Maglinte, Somesh Kumar.

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