

3

Process documentation research

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• Introduction

Process documentation research (PDR) is a tool to help development organisations learn from their experiences. It is an open-ended, inductive process that explores the interface between an organisation and the people it works with. PDR takes a dynamic view of project implementation and helps to make projects respond to context-specific requirements. It is especially relevant for those organisations that emphasise the importance of participatory processes.

This paper is based on the endeavours of the Gujarat Institute of Development Research in documenting the implementation of a social forestry project by a leading NGO, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP). The purpose of writing this paper is to share our initial dilemmas, field experiences and some of the questions which emerged from the PDR process.

When AKRSP approached the Gujarat Institute to undertake the PDR, we were surprised. Why should they not undertake the process internally? Why should the AKRSP choose formally trained social science researchers in preference to those with experience in project implementation? However, we soon learned why:

- *selective access to information*, if undertaken internally, PDR would lack objectivity because the agency itself is one of the stakeholders in the process;
- *appropriate skills*, practitioners may not have the research skills necessary to identify, generate and analyse data on a large number of interrelated variables that may influence the process directly as well as indirectly; and,
- *inadequate time*, practitioners rarely have time to write about or reflect on their experiences. Without employing extra staff, the systematic recording that is required by PDR could be very time consuming for field staff.

• Objectives

With this rationale, we undertook the PDR-exercise. We wanted to generate information on the socio-economic profile of the project villages and prepare a chronology of the critical events in the process of project implementation. Additionally, we needed to identify factors that enabled, as well as constrained, project implementation and assess whether the project was consistent with its basic objectives.

To achieve these objectives, we focused our investigation to the following questions:

- What is the rationale (or suitability) of the specific project in the target villages?
- How participatory is the process of implementation?
- What is the outcome at the end of critical stages of the project, and why?

The PDR exercise was initiated when the social forestry project was almost half way through its implementation. We captured the process for a one year period but tried to cover the entire period of project activities. To do this, we had to depend on recall and written documents to understand the initial phases. The seven-step process we used in the PDR exercise is outlined in Table 1 and each step is described in more detail below.

Table 1: The seven stages used in process documentation research

Modus operandi	Central Themes	Lessons learnt
<i>Step One: Understanding the project objectives and the participatory approach adopted by the NGO</i>		
Discussions with NGO staff at various levels	Understanding the varying perceptions about NGO's role for initiating activities in specific village context.	The need for greater clarity and continuity of dialogue at all levels within the NGO was realised. This might help then reach a more cohesive strategy.
<i>Step 2: Identifying a framework of the key factors and their influence on the participatory process</i>		
A review of the theoretical and empirical evidence	Placing inter personal conflicts into the conceptual framework	Systems approach to problem resolution
<i>Step 3: Recruiting and training the field observers who reflect the field realities</i>		
Observation of NGO staff both at the regional office as well in the village	Sensitising the field observers to: objectivity, triangulation, maintaining role as an independent observer and tracing logical links between discrete events.	Field observer has to continuously monitor various events that may directly or indirectly influence the project and people's participation within it.
<i>Step 4: Establishing close rapport and building confidence among the village community</i>		
Explaining the true identity of the PDR-researchers as an independent team trying to help the NGO attain a more participatory process	Enabling people to declare their true perceptions of the NGO's activities and their shortcomings in the implementation process.	PDR- researchers should aim at strengthening the ties between the NGO and the community rather than intervene in the process.
<i>Step 5: Village mapping and identification of the key factors influencing people's participation</i>		
Group meetings with different community groups. Structural data collection at the household level.	Collection of a wide range of information on different themes, including seasonality, resource use and local conflicts.	Should not rely on the data already collected by the NGO as this reflects their perceptions. Cross-checks and verification are important.
<i>Step 6: Preparing the chronology of the major events</i>		
Discussions and compilation of information from secondary sources. The key questions for ascertaining the information are: Who participated in the process? What was discussed? Who took the major decisions?	Compare individuals' perceptions at different points in time and explore their explanations for these changes. To prepare the chronology, identify people's expectations, explore group dynamics and measures to improve participation.	PDR should ideally commence at the stage of planning the project intervention. If the PDR starts later, preparation of a chronology of events and their implications becomes crucial.
<i>Step 7: Identification of major issues, discussion with the NGO and report writing</i>		
Identification of enabling and constraining factors in implementation process and compare with project's basic objectives.	Some of the issues raised appeared 'academic' to the NGO and without due consideration for the constraints faced in implementing field level projects.	Avoid the tone of 'sitting in final judgement' on the NGO's progress. But it is crucial to raise issues which initiate a process of self reflection within the NGO. The aim is to indicate potential problems, not evaluate project implementation. It is as important to understand 'what is feasible', as 'what is ideal'.

• Step 1

Each person plays a significant role in shaping the implementation of a project. But gaining consensus on the process was difficult. NGO staff often had different understandings of the basic rationale for the project. For example, perspectives on the social forestry programme

varied widely. In its most comprehensive form, social forestry was seen as an integral part of the overall farming system, improving cultivation, land husbandry and tree and soil conservation simultaneously and in a mutually reinforcing manner. Other perspectives were more limited. Some staff viewed social forestry as yet another programme to intensify

AKRSP's activities. Others viewed it as a 'trees' for biomass programme, which would generally 'do good' for the environment. Evidently, for many staff, the project had special appeal because of its direct employment potential. Bridging the perception-gap was necessary as a first step towards setting the PDR agenda.

- **Step 2**

As a starting point, a project framework could be derived from existing theories. However, it is essential a framework is developed that fits the specific local context. For example, collective local action in the social forestry project could be analysed through economic livelihoods and social hierarchy among the different stakeholders. However, we found that the inter-personal dynamics were more important. We also found that our efforts to understand the history of scattered and apparently sporadic events helped unravel the complex local realities. This was possible because we were able to build our field observations into a broad conceptual framework that we had developed previously.

- **Step 3**

The field observers were given in-house orientation by the NGO. Actual training began with the process of project implementation. The main emphasis during the on-the-job training was: unbiased observation of different versions of the same reality, verification of information, and interaction with a large number of households from different sectors of the society.

- **Step 4**

It takes substantial time to establish the credibility of the PDR team among the village community. There is always a real risk that people might lose interest if they realise that the PDR team have only a facilitating and advisory role and do not control the implementation process. Thus, the PDR team should endeavour to strengthen ties between the NGO and the people, without intervening too heavily in the process.

- **Step 5**

The implementing agency may not always collect detailed information on project-specific variables. At times, lapses occur due to time constraints or 'excessive' familiarity with the situation which can lead to the omission of important variations between households. To overcome this, a range of different group meetings were organised for collecting household-based information.

- **Step 6**

Tracing the history of project implementation involved several rounds of discussions with various actors, including AKRSP staff, representatives from village institutions and members of different social groups. Since the social forestry project had started before we undertook the PDR exercise, it was difficult to trace the chronology of important events, particularly the role of people in each event.

Secondary sources of information became important, including the minutes of meetings, notes or diaries prepared by village staff, project files and records of financial transactions. However, secondary information was often lacking because of inadequate record keeping practices. In most cases, substantive information on the three questions outlined in Step 6, Table 1 was not available.

- **Step 7**

The PDR exercise highlighted some of the important factors that enabled or constrained project implementation. These were compared with the basic objectives of the project.

For instance, issues relating to the choice of technology, selective participation, narrow-base of village organisations, links to government organisations and replicability were raised and discussed with NGO staff. This did lead, at least in the initial stages, to some resistance. Many NGO staff felt the issues raised were too theoretical and devoid of a proper understanding of the hazards of 'doing' a project versus 'viewing' one. Some of their reactions may have been justified. However, raising these issues did establish a process of self-reflection which had significant

learning value. In that sense, our role was to highlight potential problem areas, rather than evaluate the outcome.

• Consolidating our experiences

Our experiences in conducting PDR for the social forestry project may help develop further a PDR-methodology. We discovered that baseline information at the individual as well as community level is quite important. Ideally, data should be collected by combining both survey and participatory methodologies. What is more important, however, is an iterative process whereby researchers go 'back and forth' to validate and expand their data base. No one approach for data collection can be advocated.

Maintaining a subtle distance from NGO-staff is crucial while making critical observations and/or constructive suggestions. A careful balance should be established between not being influenced by the NGO's perception about the process but, at the same time, not being so harsh as to dampen the very spirit of 'doing' something positive.

Ideally, PDR should commence from the beginning of a project and should continue until all the potential linkages of the project are explored. This calls for sustained interests on the part of the researchers, particularly in field observations.

The researchers should take a pro-active role if required. This means that instead of merely observing and following the implementation as it takes place, PDR-researchers might have to facilitate the process. This could be through creating appropriate platforms for dialogue or disseminating relevant information among larger sections of the community. This kind of pro-active role (often described, as 'backstopping') might be necessary if the process has reached a deadlock due to communication gaps at various levels.

• Methodological questions

The following questions emerged from the PDR process with AKRSP:

- Is it essential that the PDR-researchers should agree with the objective, content and approach of the implementing agency? This is pertinent because the goal of PDR is to strengthen the decision making processes which, at times might call for a pro-active role on the part of the PDR-team.
- Should the implementing agency play a more active role in PDR? Or, should it get involved only at the time of discussing the reports prepared by the PDR team?
- Generally, PDR is directly concerned with a specific micro-level initiative, such as the social forestry programme. Is it necessary or desirable to relate PDR to the developmental process within a region?
- Documenting the events as they happen may not lead to a comprehensive understanding of the situation unless information is linked to certain key external or historical factors. In this case, should PDR try to relate the process with the larger 'external' forces at work. If so, how can we maintain PDR as an exploratory process and avoid developing an evaluation methodology?

Reflections on the above issues would help NGOs to recognise the use and application of PDR. It would also help sharpen the methodology so that PDR can evolve to make a positive contribution towards an improved understanding of participatory processes.

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