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Two cheers for RRA

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- ## Introduction

During recent years there has been ever increasing emphasis on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) rather than Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA). The change in name of IIED's journal from '*RRA Notes*' to '*PLA Notes* - Notes on Participatory Learning and Action' is just one example of this change in emphasis. While this recognition of the importance of participation in development is to be welcomed, it sometimes feels as is if RRA has been left out in the cold and is no longer sufficiently 'politically correct'.

There has also been concern among PRA practitioners over the misuse of the PRA label and techniques. This concern has been expressed in 'Sharing our Concerns' (see *PLA Notes* 22) and a variety of articles in *PLA Notes* 24. Some of the issues include:

- the use of the term PRA for processes that are not participatory or empowering;
- the use of PRA by organisations that are not in themselves participatory and/or prepared to hand over power and decision making to local communities; and,
- attempting to use PRA to produce rapid and/or extractive results.

Some of these concerns can at least be partly addressed by recognising that there are circumstances in the real world where RRA is more appropriate than PRA (see Table 1). This means identifying circumstances in which RRA is the correct option and not letting fashion condemn RRA automatically as second best. It is also often appropriate to use approaches that combine aspects of PRA and RRA according to the local circumstances.

I have facilitated both training and field appraisals in which the most appropriate approach was towards the RRA end of the spectrum, but which, for funding and Public Relations purposes was called PRA. This is crazy and unhelpful to everyone.

- ## When is RRA best?

So what then are the circumstances when it is better to use RRA? Here are some examples from my experience, perhaps other readers can add theirs.

In transient situations

During and after war or disaster, relief and rehabilitation programmes often need to be set up relatively quickly. Information about local conditions and the priorities and viewpoints of the people affected are crucial to the effectiveness of these programmes. In these circumstances results are often needed quickly. The situation is changing too rapidly and communities are forming and dispersing too often for the trust and time needed for effective PRA to yield results.

RRA can provide both accurate local data and an opportunity for the views of those involved to be fed into planning. In these circumstances, it maybe the most participatory approach possible.

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Table 1: Comparing PRA and RRA[1]

Criteria	PRA	RRA
Objective	For the community to decide development priorities and plans (which may subsequently be presented to government or agency for support)	For the agency to decide relief or development priorities and plans
Timescale	The appraisal can be short or prolonged but it is part of a longer term process in the community	The appraisal is normally relatively rapid - but is part of a longer term data gathering and planning process within the agency. (The appraisal is also part of the events affecting the community and has an impact, whether or not this is planned by the agency)
Key actors	Community members, often facilitated by outsiders	Outsiders, often facilitated by community members
Interpretation of results	By the community	By outsiders
Techniques used	Wide variety - can be the same as RRA	Wide variety - can be the same as PRA
Political correctness	High (no funding without it)	Moderate/low (seen as passé)
Usefulness	Depends on context	Depends on context

[1] in reality most appraisals combine elements of both.

An example of this occurred recently in Sierra Leone. When peace suddenly seemed likely, some large donors gave NGOs just a few weeks to submit rehabilitation proposals for funding. One can perhaps criticise the donors for their short timescale, but for the NGOs involved, RRA was probably the best way to produce proposals that reflected the needs of the communities involved.

In extensive situations

A by-product of PRA is that some NGOs end up working intensively over a longer time in a smaller number of communities. This should result in both increased participation and quality of the programmes in the villages involved. But what about the communities that are not included in the programmes? This is particularly serious when there are limited numbers of NGOs, people with community development skills and funds to go around. Islands of excellence can be created which do not always 'trickle outwards'.

In the context of post-war rehabilitation in Mozambique, international NGOs have moved from extensive 'relief programmes' to intensive 'development programmes', often involving only a small fraction of the people previously covered by relief. At the same time funding 'now that the emergency is over' has been shrinking. Yet the Government and local NGOs have not got the capacity to work with those who are excluded by development programmes.

I have worked facilitating both RRA and PRA in Mozambique. Often, I feel that the approach of RRA is more appropriate in the current context of trying to develop rehabilitation programmes that reach a significant number of people with very limited human and financial resources[1].

Robert Chambers in a pertinent article on 'Making the Best of Going to Scale' (*PLA Notes* 24) gives a good overview of the opportunities and risks of using PRA at a wider level. Perhaps some emphasis should be given to adapting PRA for extensive use - I suspect this might mean bringing it closer to RRA as participation takes time. And this is not always available or fundable.

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[1] For further discussion on rehabilitation in Mozambique see M. Whiteside 1996 - *Realistic Rehabilitation - linking relief and development in Mozambique*; Development in Practice 6:2.

When the institutional context is not participatory

At the community level, PRA is facilitated by organisations (whether Government, multilateral or NGO) which have differing commitments to empowerment and participation. Often outside organisations are only willing to support ideas coming out of PRA if they are consistent with their original intentions (see *Feedback*, this issue). But local priorities tend not to be supported if they are contrary to the ethos or too challenging for the organisation. This establishes a kind of participation or empowerment within limits set by the agency!

Sometimes it is argued that within a non-participatory environment, PRA creates grassroots pressure for greater participation and is therefore justified as a way of changing the institutional context. In other cases PRA can raise expectations that will not be fulfilled and people end up frustrated. Judgement is needed on whether PRA or RRA is most appropriate in each circumstance. However there are certainly circumstances where RRA is the more appropriate and honest approach.

• Conclusion

The purpose of this article is not to argue that either RRA or PRA is better. Each is appropriate to different circumstances, along with many variants that combine elements of both. The purpose is to challenge the current orthodoxy that PRA is always 'best' and that more participation is always 'better' (there are costs as well as benefits inherent in increased participation). Instead we need to discuss which approaches are most appropriate for which context. Therefore *Two Cheers for RRA*.

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