

Towards full participation in development

by Kumaraswamynadar T Arasu

with a response from Neela Mukherjee

• Introduction

In India, PRA is a prestigious term, not only with NGOs, but also with many government departments. This article examines recent experiences of using PRA in planning, monitoring and evaluating different projects. It is based on personal observations and informal interviews with PRA trainers, facilitators and participants.

'Alternative for India Development' (AID) is an NGO working in Bihar, Orissa and Tamil Nadu districts of India. AID is a partner in three official aid programmes of the Indian Government. One is the Bihar Education Project (a UNICEF supported local government programme), the second is an Integrated Watershed Development Programme of the federal government, and the third is an IFAD-supported Women in Development Programme, implemented through the Tamil Nadu Government.

Emerging problems

Macro and micro-level operational and institutional constraints affect the level of participation of local people in the development process. These include: the priorities of donors, the shortcomings of facilitators, the lack of proper consultation, time constraints imposed by implementing agencies and the amount of time that local people have available to contribute to PRA.

The following points summarise methodological problems that have been

encountered while practising PRA in different development projects in India. Many of these observations are not new and will be familiar to PRA practitioners. The aim of this paper is to stimulate debate on how the potential of PRA can be reached more fully in the future.

- As official development projects, the three projects listed above were neither identified by local people nor developed by them. The agenda was pre-determined by the implementing agencies. This led to differences in understanding between local people and development practitioners. Where people did identify their needs through PRA, expectations were raised. But resources were rarely available to meet local needs, except where they coincided with immediate project objectives. Local people learned to find out the 'real' agenda and interest of the PRA facilitators (e.g. in watershed management) and to define their needs accordingly, based on their past experience. In these cases, the donors' priorities and objectives determined the views that were experienced locally.
- Where local people express their needs, a key issue is how to integrate these into the specific project framework, procedures and formats demanded by each donor. Is it possible for local people to evolve a project that can be fitted into a logical framework? How can local people and facilitators jointly set goals, purposes, activities and indicators? How can project and development cycles be synchronised?
- Training in PRA is frequently given by government staff. The methodology and techniques suggested in the trainings are

Feedback.... Feedback.... Feedback....

followed in the field. Few efforts are made to evolve or adapt the approaches. PRA seems to be undertaken with greater attention to procedures and formats than to enabling real local participation. For example, standard questions given in the form of a checklist for trainee PRA facilitators were invariably followed in the field, rather than evolving something specific to the local context.

- Many facilitators are not clear about using PRA to build a participatory environment for effective local decision making. They view PRA as a set of visualisation techniques rather than as an empowering process that enables poor people to have greater control over their own development. Emphasis is frequently placed on the product (e.g. creating maps, matrices and calendars). Yet decisions on the tools, symbols, materials and design are made more by the facilitators than local people.
- PRA has been carried out with little attention to the availability of different sectors of the community, such as women, migrant workers, bonded labourers, child labourers and children, for consultation in the participatory planning process. Without careful scheduling of PRA sessions, the voices of these vulnerable sectors of society are easily missed. This requires facilitators to address their own assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes about the contribution that the poorest sectors of the community have to contribute to a development debate.
- In a government watershed programme, the policy was to evolve grassroots plans using PRA. However, little time was given for the preparation of plans with local people. The District Officials set deadlines for the submission of plans for financial approval. Their concern was dispersing money within a given timeframe. As a consequence, the real purpose of the participatory planning was lost. Although local people and the government were described as partners in the project, those who held the purse strings were the dominant actors.

● **Reflections from practice**

There is great potential for PRA to contribute to a process of participatory development.

However, these observations suggest that local people may not always be free to share their information and participate fully in PRA. This article has highlighted some of the many barriers to participation in a planning process.

Full and long term participation is crucial for developing a real sense of local ownership of project activities. This requires continuous feedback and information exchange between facilitators and local people. This should not only occur during initial project assessments, but should continue throughout the project cycle to ensure that those at the grassroots have complete information about the status and progress of project activities.

There are many other issues about PRA on which I could comment. What is presented here illustrates some of the limitations to using participatory approaches to development and is based on recent field experiences. There have been, and continue to be, many innovations in the use of PRA. Yet by presenting this paper, I hope it will help in the search for best practice. We need to reflect on our progress to utilise the full potential of PRA in the future. Thus, it is in a spirit of optimism and a drive for continual improvement, that this paper is presented.

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● **Towards full participation: a response from Neela Mukherjee**

Arasu provides an invaluable set of 'learnings from the field' on different aspects of PRA. Many of us are concerned about the quality of PRA and may share similar experiences. As a PRA practitioner, I discuss frequently the practice of PRA. Some of the points emerging from discussions with fellow practitioners are included below and may help in further analysis of the issues raised by this article.

If we consider that PRA's goal is to bring about people's empowerment, the question is 'how can empowerment be achieved with PRA?'. Many practitioners get frustrated when PRA appears not to bring about the

Feedback.... Feedback.... Feedback....

empowerment of resource-poor sectors of society. Yet it is unrealistic to believe that a few PRA sessions can change power relations in any society (involving numerous different groups) and lead to a rapid process of change.

In a short period of time, a participatory process can, at best, only be initiated through PRA. The process must be ongoing and necessarily time consuming because it requires the more equitable sharing of societal power by empowering people who are weak, deprived and marginalised. Unfortunately, the time dimensions of participation and empowerment are not appreciated by many development agencies. Too often, expectations of what PRA can deliver are too high and anticipate 'results' too soon.

Multiple forces determine people's participation or non-participation. PRA is a powerful approach at the micro-level but cannot work in isolation. In any society, sociological, economic, political, legal and environmental factors each influence people's participation in different ways.

It is not easy to isolate PRA from the influence of other factors. While PRA can attempt to influence some of these factors over time, other factors are best influenced at a meso- or macro-level, through policy-making and the development of appropriate institutions. This does not undermine the developmental change which PRA can bring about at the grassroots. Instead, it reminds us that a supportive policy and institutional framework helps sustain people's participation over time.

Attitudes and behaviour

Our conventional attitudes and behaviour can constrain our understanding of the local environment. In this context, PRA findings can provide powerful information, feedback and recommendations to experts and policy-makers at the macro-level. These findings can be used for advocacy purposes by different institutions. The 1996 Human Development Report of UNDP, Bangladesh, based on PRA and containing poor people's recommendations, is a pointer in this direction.

People's empowerment is a gradual process along a continuum. Moving from one end of the continuum to the other, in terms of participation, breaking free of the dependency syndrome and cumulative learning, is a time consuming process. Yet we must reflect on the quality of participation during this process, using multiple indicators, at all times.

We tend to get impatient because our attitudes focus on developing and achieving physical targets. We are used to measuring development through the number of water tanks, dams, watersheds and school buildings. But rarely do we use indicators of human development and empowerment. These cannot be easily measured through simple, quantitative indicators.

Whose priorities count?

Ideally, development activities should be based on the priorities of local people. But different agencies have different agendas and so tend to pursue their own priorities. This can be problematic as a pre-determined development agenda, such as a strategy of watershed development, limits the role of PRA. PRA becomes a *means* to ensure people's acceptability of a top-down agenda.

But, even with a pre-determined agenda, there is considerable scope for local participation. This requires fieldworkers to interact with local communities and explain honestly the purpose of the project, their expectations and modalities. This is usually done to create rapport with local communities, whose cooperation is required, but can be a more empowering process.

Labelling

The term PRA is used loosely by different agencies to describe development interventions at the grassroots. To maintain the quality of participation, it is important for us to distinguish between different types of development interventions and seek clarification of the role of different actors in the process.

Observations from field experience suggest that it is possible to combine participatory

Feedback.... Feedback.... Feedback....

approaches with different techniques that are better suited to generating data. However, it is crucial to distinguish between RRA, essentially a joint data collection exercise, and a truly participatory approach. In the former, people's participation and empowerment are limited by an extractive approach which may be labelled participatory but is merely a method for eliciting information.

• **Conclusions**

This discussion may suggest that PRA practitioners are looking for excuses for why PRA does not always work well or fails to reach its goals. This is not the case. Rather, we are reflecting on our experiences, embracing our errors, searching for ways to improve our quality of learning and understanding better the multiple forces operating at the grassroots, which facilitate or constrain local participation.

Now that participatory development projects and activities initiated in the first-half of the 1990s have started yielding results, we need to take a close look at the processes of participation. Arasu has raised many important issues. We require further debate and discussions on them for they help enrich our learning, clarify our thoughts and contribute towards improving the quality of PRA.

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This *Feedback* has raised many important issues, such as the need for continual improvement in sustaining participatory approaches to development. As noted by both authors, many practitioners will share similar experiences. If you have any comments on the issues raised by KT Arasu or Neela Mukherjee, please send them into us for publication in the next issue of PLA Notes.

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