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Extracts

Props for research

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The rural population in Garhwal, India, where we worked, often have difficulty in understanding questionnaire surveys. We have found that props can make it easier for them to understand the meaning of questions. We define props as tools that enable local people to visualise the theme of questions and debates. They should be made out of materials that are commonly used and locally meaningful. To collect data relating to the quality of life for rural people in Garhwal, we used several props, two of which we describe here.

The ladder

The ladder proved a useful method of enabling people to express their level of satisfaction. The ladder was made of sticks (see Figure 1), which are easily available, and contains five different steps. As one moves up the ladder, it represents higher levels of satisfaction.

Respondents were asked to choose a step that best represents their level of satisfaction. For example, to the question, 'How much are you satisfied with your level of education?', respondents could point a step on the ladder representing: Very dissatisfied (Step 1), Dissatisfied (Step 2), OK (Step 3), Satisfied (Step 4) and Very satisfied (Step 5). Whenever a researcher asked the question related to satisfaction, he explained the details of the 'ladder steps' of satisfaction

Happy and sad faces

The second prop used for the research was seven faces showing different expressions. The faces were used for measuring the happiness of the people of Garhwal.

Figure 1. The satisfaction ladder
Drawing: Laura Greenwood.

One of the questions asked was, 'Overall, how happy would you say that you are?'. The respondent was then asked to choose a face that best represented his or her feelings. The faces were popular amongst the villagers and helped to make the questionnaire very easy to understand.

Experiences

Eight teams involved in the research used the props in their work in Garhwal. The two props made the questionnaire easier and more interesting for the respondents, as well as for the investigators. Without them, the teams may not have been able to explain the questions to the local people. The people were also able to better communicate their feelings to the researchers. We suggest other researchers should use props and adapt them according to the needs of the local people and environment.

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Looking beyond: PRA or PRI?

John Wilson

'What we need is PRI, Participatory Rural Implementation' the head of a community-based learning centre said to me recently. 'Isn't PRA just a farce for academics?'. I responded: 'I think you are misunderstanding it. It may be a farce for some people but, carried out as it should be, it is a very useful and empowering approach that can help communities analyse and better understand their own situation'.

However, PRA is just one of many approaches that help turn a theoretical and important awareness into reality. PRA has caught the imagination and funding of a wide sector of people. It may have grown not because it is the 'wonder' that some people think it is, but because of some 'big names' jumping on the bandwagon.

For PRA to achieve its full potential, it should be recognised for what it is, limitations and all. It should be seen within a larger context and linked to other approaches that achieve what it cannot achieve. This seems to be a critical issue in development work today: to link together methods and experience into a fuller process. Too often, 'new' methods, useful as they are, remain trapped within themselves.

Establishing the interface between external agents and the community is a first step to building up trust. But is an external facilitator needed? In many less industrialised countries, people have been repressed, both mentally and physically. They no longer believe in themselves or their abilities. They feel at the bottom of a social ladder which does not recognise their skills and knowledge. I believe that, in these situations, an external facilitator can act as a catalyst: to spark a revitalisation, begin a process of renewal and help people recognise the depth of their knowledge and skills.

Approaches such as PRA enable communities to carry out exercises in which they look closely at their own situation. They may map their resources or look at their history, but what is important is the recognition and reflection of how much they know.

Cause and effect become connected. The result should be a much fuller understanding by many more people. If done properly, this process enables true participation. It also provides the foundations for involvement and awareness in the next stage: where to? With a community vision or goal, implementation becomes important. But this is frequently missing. Comprehensive assessments are carried out. People get excited about the level of participation but implementation may not follow.

Of course, people are living their lives and 'implementation' is happening to a certain extent. In fact this forms the basis of future action. However implementation, in terms of substantially improving the situation can be lacking. There is a danger of romanticising local knowledge and skills and so condemning people to poverty and further exploitation. It's a question of balance.

Thus, while I believe it is important to develop, innovate and improve methods, it is just as important that any one of them does not get carried away with itself. The methods of participation should not become separated from the process of participation. For those working in development, the agenda must be meaningful empowerment for millions of people. It is the responsibility of agents involved in facilitating this to continually look beyond what they are doing, to see how it links with what others are doing.

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