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Reflections on institutionalising participatory approaches in local NGOs in Eastern Nepal

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• Summary

This paper reflects on an 8-day training workshop held in Eastern Nepal for local non-government organisations. The aim of the workshop was to bring together a group of people committed to a community empowering process. The workshop involved developing appropriate attitudes and behaviour for community participation, practical work in the communities and preparation of an action plan at two levels, in the community and for developing a participatory climate for Dhankuta NGOs to work together. A follow-up was planned and implemented to allow for further sharing and deepened reflection.

• Background

This paper describes a process of needs assessment and action planning adopted in a workshop environment in Nepal. The workshop brought together people from local NGOs in Dhankuta committed to a community empowering process. Twenty four people attended the workshop with two external facilitators from Kathmandu. The workshop was conducted in Nepali.

One of the objectives of the workshop was that participants should understand how to work with communities. It was felt that to do this effectively, they need to be aware of the ABC of community participation, i.e. of right Attitude, be aware of their Behaviour and show a willingness to Change (ACTIONAID 1996). It was felt that the ABC of community participation needed to be considered because of the mechanistic way that PRA can and has been used in Nepal.

A second objective of the workshop was to ensure that the process adopted moved beyond needs assessment to develop action plans and commitment. PRA has been criticised where it does not go beyond appraisal (White 1994), to enable analysis, planning, prioritisation of possible options, and finally a commitment to act.

A final objective for the workshop was to ensure that the processes agreed on for needs assessment were socially inclusive. Projects that purport to be participatory and involve all sectors of society can fail to produce a collective plan owned and shared by all.

Often PRA takes place in public spaces and in the presence of outsiders. This is particularly pertinent to the case of Nepal, as in much of South Asia, where 'Women are typically (explicitly or implicitly) excluded from public spaces and activities' (Mosse 1995). This means that the approach to participatory analysis must be modified in terms of social context, timing and techniques, so that women's views can be heeded. There should be a place to involve women that is non-public with space for non-formal interaction.

To help achieve the above objectives, an approach was developed to take on the challenges of going beyond appraisal, to enable analysis, planning, prioritisation of possible solutions, and finally a commitment to act. The approach is called Participatory Appraisal of Needs and the Development of Action (PANDA) and incorporates tools from management sciences and operational research.

What PANDA does

PANDA pays attention to group issues, is an inclusive approach and aims to move beyond appraisal and help participants to develop action plans and build commitment. Specifically, it:

- Allows sharing of knowledge;
- Encourages analysis of needs by the community;
- Develops a prioritised list of concerns;
- Facilitates understanding of concerns enabling solutions to be determined;
- Develops a plan of action that incorporates a commitment package;
- Allows time for implementation of plan; and,
- Encourages the community to analyse its own achievements.

PANDA was developed and used in the trainings because of some of the limitations in using PRA, including:

- Doesn't always take into account the power relations within society;
- The approach often takes place in public places when women aren't always free to attend;
- If there is no sense of ownership very little sustainable change takes place; and,
- Doesn't always take into account the skills, attitude and behaviour of the facilitator.

Workshop approach

To enable participants to focus on attitudes and behaviour, the facilitator encouraged the group to consider the different types of development worker. They then individually reflected on which type of worker they perceived themselves to be and shared this with the larger group. They set themselves the challenge to be a development worker who is trying to bring about radical change in their communities.

A further exercise used in the workshop was an 'animal attributes' game. This allowed participants to consider their own personal attributes in a non discriminating manner. It also allowed them to consider the importance of being socially inclusive. Society in Nepal is hierarchical, and there are divisions on the basis of caste, ethnicity and gender. Other activities used to develop reflections on attitude were Johari's window and games to improve teamwork (Pretty et al. 1996).

Field practical of PANDA training workshop

The practical part of the workshop was carried out from Day 4. The first visit to the five chosen villages was an attempt to build rapport. The team went to a central meeting point and chatted to people. They then went from house to house in the village requesting some of the villagers to come to the central meeting point. This exercise allowed the team to explain their presence, that they would be returning to carry out a series of exercises and that the products from these exercises would be given to the village. In the general village meeting the team discussed a suitable time to come to the village to carry out the activities.

Although we used several methodologies, in this article we describe the semi-structured interviews and pair-wise ranking of village priorities (see Figure 1). Symbols were used so that literate as well as non-literate people could be included. This exercise highlights the different priorities of different sectors of the community. Ten people were involved in preparing this diagram. One of the members of the group was a displaced woman. There was a balanced gender representation. Although there were some representatives from the dominant castes (Brahmin and Chettri) there were also representatives from the disadvantaged groups.

Figure 1. Photograph showing result of pair-wise ranking in village



The results of the pair-wise ranking showed village priorities to be firstly the provision of drinking water, followed by schools, health posts, police posts and finally, telecommunications.

Dealing with difference

Pair-wise ranking showed that for many in the village, the main priority was to obtain a close source of drinking water. They had a stream running close by, but said that it was dirty and

that they could only use it for washing but not for drinking. The nearest drinking water source involved a three hour round trip on foot. UNDP had put three taps in the village but none were operational as the source of water had dried up.

The high caste Brahmin families in the village didn't consider water to be the main problem as they had their own personal water supplies, which weren't for general use. They felt the main problem was a lack of communication

facilities and that the village needed telecommunications. Not everyone in the village considered this a priority however, There were several different interest groups within the village. A police post was mentioned as an issue by some, but not everyone was concerned with this issue either (Figure 1).

As mentioned previously there were representatives from different social groups within the village during this exercise. Everybody was able to voice their opinion as to which priority should receive most attention. The facilitator ensured that there was consensus amongst all the participants and tried to get the villagers to focus on what could be solved within the village. The villagers realised they could not solve the water problem themselves, but that they could seek help from the government drinking water office in Dhankuta.

One of the local NGOs involved in the workshop suggested in a reflections session that they could seek support for the project through a donor funded programme. This provided the basis for village follow-up and action and ensured that the village visits were more than a 'training ground' for the workshop participants. The NGO did follow this up. However, they were unable to solve this problem as the feasibility study found the water source to be unreliable and the nearest reliable water source was too far from the village to make it financially viable.

New learnings

Ranking in the village helped the workshop participants to understand community priorities and how the community could plan and act themselves without external help. The follow-up workshop allowed for more sharing with the community members. The women wanting community literacy and schooling for their children went to the District Education Office and the Nepal Family Planning Association agreed to help them run a literacy class. The UNDP building has been converted to a school for those too small to walk the three hours to the nearest school. The village elder went to the Ministry of Health and they agreed to run an outreach clinic twice a month. He also put forward a request to the

Telecommunication office for a telephone, which is now functional.

Through these community actions the NGO participants were able to see that a small external stimulus can bring about change by the community members themselves. They found this quite challenging to their present mode of working.

Reflections

On the last day the team handed over to the village a pictorial copy of all the activities that had been carried out in the village. The village was impressed with the approach. One comment made was; 'This is the first time we have been given something, previously people have only come to take information away and give us nothing in return'. It was decided in the reflection session that five NGOs would follow-up the activities initiated in the villages. An action plan was devised and responsibilities and time-scales for implementation and follow-up decided upon.

Fourteen local NGOs were involved in the first training which was held in Dhankuta in January 1997. During the final action planning, the participants requested a follow-up workshop. This was to involve sharing of the experience gained from the implementation of the action plans developed in the workshop and enable them to learn other participatory tools that they could use in their work. This follow-up training took place in April and allowed the NGOs to discuss their achievements and learn some new tools

Relations between theory and practice

It is important that groups have a conceptual understanding of a participatory approach so that the activities are not just carried out mechanically. In Nepal, PRA has become almost a 'fashion' and as a result it has been used unreflectively. It was felt that a basic understanding of attitudinal and behavioural aspects of development workers was essential and this would help to engender reflection into their behaviour. The workshop facilitators enabled the participants to reflect on their own behaviour and approach to development, to carry out work in the villages where their NGOs are working in partnership *with* local

people rather than *for* local people. All practitioners need to think continuously about how to bring about socially inclusive participation through reflection on their commitment to community development.

We would like to consider some of the implications of PANDA and PRA, in particular to reflect on the similarities and differences between them. The similarities consist in the commonality of methods and the participatory approaches that they use, and more importantly how the methods are used for development work.

Where PANDA differs is that it is more concerned about dealing with the barriers to effective action and to see the results of participant involvement taken up and institutionalised. Thus it pays considerable attention to group issues. PANDA helps with this by getting the group and outside facilitator to make a formal commitment as to what each party agrees to do and when they will do it. One of the outputs of the workshop was an action plan where organisations stated their commitment to carrying out a set of activities that would be revisited in the follow-up workshop.

The process continues and equally important are the learnings from the experience of working with different local NGOs. There have been further developments, one of which is a self-evaluation by the NGOs involved. The results of this will be shared with all concerned and other interested parties in a day workshop to be held in February 1998.

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