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Growing from the grassroots: building participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation methods in PARC

Janet Symes and Sa'ed Jasser

• Introduction

The Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees, PARC, is a Palestinian NGO with almost two decades of experience working in agriculture in rural areas of the West Bank and Gaza. PARC targets poor and marginalised farmers - both men and women - and works with them to improve their ability to make a living from farming and to develop a strong Palestinian agricultural sector.

The Palestinian context - the people's struggle

Since 1967, the West Bank and Gaza have remained under Israeli military occupation. As a result, the economy has become almost totally dependent on Israel. It has suffered from a lack of development with poor infrastructure, a negative investment climate and the restrictions imposed by the military administration. During the *intifada* (the popular uprising against the occupation) in the late 1980s and early 1990s curfews were imposed and movement within or between towns, villages or refugee camps was prevented for extended periods of time.

Contrary to expectations there has been little 'peace dividend'. Since the 1993 signing of the Oslo Accords, a closure has been in force which restricts movement. Total closure was in place for most of 1996. The West Bank and Gaza is now a complex patchwork of zones with different degrees of autonomy. The closures, curfews and blockades have had a huge impact on marketing of agricultural produce. These circumstances have many

implications for agricultural development and the use of participatory methods. This article discusses how, within PARC, we are slowly developing a more participatory approach to monitor our rural work.

Participation under occupation

The occupation severely limits the control people have over their lives leading to a 'culture of occupation' in which people feel powerless to promote change. On the other hand, the *intifada* saw a huge mobilisation of popular power. Men, women and children alike struggled together to promote their Palestinian identity and tried to build a Palestinian nation that would give them back control over their own future.

It is within this context that PARC built its close ties with the rural people, through day-to-day support during the *intifada* and efforts to counter Israeli policies that were destroying Palestinian agriculture. Voluntary committees were set up in villages which were responsible for local decision making. As a result the work was in direct response to the identified needs and priorities of the rural communities and was carried out by them.

• PM&E in PARC

The need for PM&E

The concentration on emergency work during the *intifada* led to a limited focus on the development process and the project cycle. The extremely unpredictable and volatile situation meant that planning was very difficult. The combination of these factors did

little to encourage the development of participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E).

The more stable situation of the peace process encouraged a longer term outlook. PARC began to focus on programmes and project with longer term goals, re-emphasised its agricultural extension work and concentrated on building a sustainable and viable agricultural sector. PARC also shifted from voluntary work, and expanded its employment of professional field workers.

The voluntary committees were separated from PARC's organisational structure and became the basis for establishing an independent farmers' union. Although this was seen as an essential move, both for PARC to move forward and for the farmers to have an independent voice, this meant that PARC's decision making process was now one step removed from the rural communities. PARC had to develop new ways of working and, as a result, began to develop participatory techniques. It also became increasingly interested in measuring and understanding the impact of its work, both from a desire to learn from its experiences and ensure that it maintained its relevance to the community, but also because of an increasing interest by PARC's donors in the impact of its work.

- **Building an organisational commitment to PM&E**

Although people were very much involved in PARC, many of its methods, and particularly those of planning, monitoring and evaluation, saw participation in terms of 'consultation'. In general, the community was seen as an information source, but not as key actors playing a central role in the decision-making processes of the organisation. Much of the early monitoring and evaluation work centred on the collection of data through questionnaires. However, PARC quickly realised the limitations of these methods, and began to introduce more participatory techniques.

The Consultancy Unit was set up with the specific task to develop PM&E. The Unit has been working to support the use of participatory techniques and to build an

understanding of the concepts involved. This process involved several aspects, which are described below.

Interactive methods

We needed to make the communication process between our staff and the communities more effective. We found that community or interest group workshops were a particularly useful way of working because they gave people the opportunity to discuss and formulate ideas about the projects and work. In particular they enabled women to gain an equal voice.

Due to the conservative nature of rural Palestine, women and men meet separately. In the evaluation of an integrated programme in one village, men had decided what the women could do, but the women redefined their activities for themselves. The men then realised how women had asserted their views, and concluded that it had been the women who had accomplished the most: they had been innovative and successful in getting their ideas off the ground. They appreciated the women's involvement in the evaluation, and even started discussing how women could become involved in the all-male village co-ordinating committee.

The techniques used in workshops were designed to encourage in depth analysis and to develop future directions for the work. We often use variants on SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Objectives, Threats), but mostly designed group activities specifically for each workshop using a range of tools, such as key points on cards and ranking for prioritisation. We are aware that consensus can actually cover up dispute, so try to build in opportunities for individual expression of ideas through various media, as well as group discussion.

Our experience shows that we can develop PM&E more easily in programmes that incorporate some degree of individual focus. For example, in a women's programme that incorporates leadership and administrative training for women who set up new businesses with small scale credit, the women have the incentive to develop their own monitoring and evaluation processes. But in village- or group-

wide projects this has been a more difficult process.

Team work: sharing experiences is sharing lessons

When we carry out evaluations of specific programmes and projects, a team is set up to lead the process. The team usually comprises at least one person each from the Consultancy Unit, programme, field staff and the community. Outside evaluators are only used if there is a specific reason (e.g. at the request of a donor or if a specific issue would benefit from an alternative or mediating perspective).

The importance of community involvement is illustrated in an evaluation undertaken with the Farmer's Union. The initial idea for an evaluation came from PARC, but once the Farmer's Union joined the team, it became clear that what they wanted was very different to PARC's aims. So we redefined the aims to cover both requirements. New working relations between PARC and the Union developed and the farmers who had participated in the evaluation team went on to lead a planning process for the Union.

From number crunchers to listeners: developing the skills of our staff

Successful PM&E requires much more than using different methods, it can only work with an understanding of what participation means, and this often means developing the skills of those involved. In PARC, monitoring was initially understood as a process of collecting quantitative data on projects, such as how many trees were planted. The methods used tended to encourage this approach and reinforced the idea that 'scientifically' calculated data were the only valid information. Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation was seen as simply bureaucratic procedures required by management.

In Arabic, the word most commonly used for monitoring conveys a meaning related to 'controlling'. This, among other factors, has contributed to a general feeling that monitoring is a negative process, designed to 'check whether we are working to the rules.' This is aggravated by perception that monitoring and evaluation is the work of a

separate unit within PARC. By introducing participatory methods, the staff started to see the benefits of alternative monitoring approaches for both themselves and their projects. We also ensured that programme and field staff are fully involved in all stages in monitoring and evaluation.

This involvement enables them to take on responsibility for the PM&E work and to see it as an essential part of the project process. The Women's Unit of PARC in Gaza decided to use some of the participatory techniques to evaluate their unit's work in more detail after participating in an organisational self-evaluation. Currently, the role of the Consultancy Unit is often just to provide support and advice to the staff's own initiatives and not be the sole driver of the process.

By using participatory techniques with senior management, we were able to encourage greater involvement of all staff. For example, during an organisational evaluation, there was an initial reluctance for all the staff to be involved, despite a willingness to encourage the participation of the target group. Now many of the ideas developed in the staff workshops are forming a key part of PARC's on-going strategic planning.

- **Moving forward: linking planning to PM&E**

M & E in the project cycle

The project cycle is usually presented as a circle linking planning, monitoring and evaluation. This depiction often leads to the unfortunate image of projects going round in circles! Unfortunately the crucial link planning and monitoring and evaluation is often not that easy to achieve. In our experience, monitoring and evaluation are seen as ways of measuring how a plan (and by implication a project) is implemented. If they are perceived to come after implementation, then the vital step of moving to the next phase of development is overlooked.

The 'learning loop'

We find that simply providing recommendations for future actions in an evaluation is simply not sufficient. The learning loop must extend to include clear plans about what to do next. It is important to include discussions and decisions about how to move forward after a PM&E activity, and to clearly identify the roles of each of the groups involved. We found that the strongest push for clarity of plans often comes from the community themselves. They are rarely content to allow the process to only look at 'impact' without including the question of 'what next?'

A process approach, rather than a project by project approach, is essential. In this way planning, monitoring and evaluation become part of a continual learning process. The trajectory may shift, but the momentum should be forward. By using a participatory approach, the engine for this momentum becomes the community, and they can control its direction.

Linking levels

We are setting up a participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation (PPME) system within PARC that will help us to ensure that planning, monitoring and evaluation are seen as intrinsically linked as one process. An essential part of this system is the linking of different levels of planning, monitoring and evaluation. This helps us to ensure that participation is not limited to the project level, but features in all levels in PARC's work.

Breaking free of the illogical framework

One of the difficulties we face in developing a PPME system for PARC is building a suitable framework. Much of the work on PPME systems has been developed by donor agencies and designed with their own reporting and monitoring in mind. However, this concentration on organisational needs is not just confined to the donors; in PARC, the main incentive for developing a PPME system stems from the need to administer money well and to meet our donor's reporting and monitoring requirements. Consequently, although participation is recognised as important, and the donors we work with encourage this in our

work, the frameworks used are based more on organisational aspects, and, in reality, tend not to promote participatory techniques.

This is partly due to the predominance of logical framework analysis (LFA) as a tool that links planning, monitoring and evaluation. The logical framework may be useful in some situations, and certainly emphasises the need to have clear objectives and indicators. However, we have found that it is not a useful tool when working from a participatory premise. In most practical applications we came across, people find it far from logical. Consequently, the framework is developed by programme managers; the field staff and programme participants are alienated from the planning process and control is concentrated in the hands of the 'LFA Expert'. This discourages participation in - and community ownership over - the development process.

LFA also implicitly encourages those who use it to fall into the trap of seeing M&E as a mechanism for checking planning, rather than a process of learning from experience. People tend to focus on whether they have fully implemented each step of the plan. The aim becomes fulfilling the plan, not promoting participatory development.

Flexibility is discouraged and the need for introducing change into a programme is considered negatively rather than being viewed as a positive outcome of a progressive monitoring process. In the real world, it is very rare that a plan is implemented with no changes, however carefully conceived. Indeed we often found that projects implemented exactly as planned had more to do with a lack of M&E than them being exceptionally well planned. This lack of flexibility is a particular problem in the present Palestinian context, where circumstances can change very rapidly. There are so many aspects that can affect a plan over which people have no control. In such circumstances, planning needs to have a degree of fluidity and responsiveness. If PM&E techniques are adopted within such a rigid framework, the alienation of the participants can become a real problem.

By offering people the tools, and encouraging their understanding of the concepts involved, they can build their own framework. Part of

this involves finding out what other people's (including the donors) PM&E needs are, ensuring that these are met and that the system is both relevant and practical. This can be achieved by encouraging a participatory approach and cultivating the communities' ability to control the development process.

• **Conclusions**

The transition from working in emergency relief during a conflict situation to an increased focus on building civil society and the development process provided a stimulus for PARC to develop its PM&E. But we still have a long way to go before we can be confident that the community is really playing the central role in PPME and that they are defining the work of PARC. We need to strengthen and widen the scope of participatory methods used, continue to develop organisational commitment to 'participation'; and create a framework that encourages participation.

There are several points that emerged from our experience in developing and using PM&E:

- Despite a background as a grassroots organisation and working with rural people as part of a popular struggle it is still vital to work with participatory techniques. The process of organisational 'scaling up' does not invalidate the use of participatory techniques, but reinforces the need for them.
- Monitoring and evaluation cannot be separated from planning since all are an intrinsic part of the development process. The linkages are crucial in establishing a learning process that can enable the development process to move forward.
- The nature of the PPME is key. The framework and methods used must have the ability to encourage real participation and give control to the community.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Janet Symes and Sa'ed Jasser, PARC, PO Box 25128, Shu'fat, Jerusalem, via Israel. Email: parcj@palnet.com
