

Can stratified PRA platforms improve dialogue and build consensus?

Author by C. U. Okoye

with a response from Somesh Kumar

Feedback is a forum for discussion in *PLA Notes*. It features articles which raise common concerns in fieldwork or training, together with a response from another PRA practitioner. Letters and articles are welcomed for this section, as are your comments on any of the issues raised by **Feedback**.

• Background

The evolving concept and practice of PRA has meant that new difficulties and concerns arise continuously. Village composition varies considerably and, as a result, PRA approaches have to be flexible. We constantly have to review the process of PRA in order to better facilitate the greater process of community dialoguing, collective planning and development.

Differentiating PRA sessions by grouping people by, for example interests and gender, has been used to empower the poor, to gain different perspectives, to build the confidence of individual groups to confront others and argue their case and negotiate a consensus in the wider grouping. While the idea of stratification is not new, the criteria and approach to delineating strata, and establishing an interface between the various groups and interests, may present new ideas for planning and executing PRA and for articulating a body of practices that may begin to frame PRA methodologies. A key aim of this paper, however, is to focus on the lessons that such an approach teaches us and to identify some points of departure for the refinement of PRA approaches.

• Heterogeneity and dissent

This article draws on the experiences of a team of resource people during a series of UNDP-sponsored rural development workshops among fisherfolk and farmers in four riverine communities of Anambra State, South Eastern Nigeria. In order to avoid the deadlock that can arise from inter-group conflicts, separate PRA sessions ('subsessions') were held with various groups of the population to accommodate minority views, eliciting underlying causes of conflict and increasing participation.

We recognise that the heterogeneity of participants in a PRA session can be advantageous in that it enhances sharing of experiences and improves the quality of debate. As we discovered, however, such hopes are only realisable where consensus on critical issues is high and already prevails. Where there is little agreement, heterogeneity among the participants can complicate the consensus building process and make it difficult to identify the key concerns of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

This was exactly what happened at the end of the first day in Atani village where the team discovered that it was considerably slowed by inter-group schisms. The diversity of the participants, which was not obvious initially, became apparent during the session. The participants included youths, women and men of various age groups, people from different parts of the village, various trade and product interests, producers, sellers, representatives of

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

religious NGOs, and government extension agents, as well as other less discernible interests. The key sources of friction among these participants were:

- the venue of the meeting was not a comfortable location for some of the participants;
- there were obvious attitudinal reactions to village realities, such as politics, power, control and authority; and,
- concerns and expectations, largely defined by age, level of education and exposure, varied widely among the participants. While some of the participants were interested in the technical aspects of primary farm production, others only wanted to discuss processing equipment or credit.

Because of the conflicts, tensions, heckling and lengthy disputes among the villagers, it became obvious that, if not properly handled, the PRA session would achieve little or nothing. The question was, how could these disagreements be better understood, reduced, eliminated or suppressed, so that participation could be improved?

Stratifying the PRA platform: criteria and approach

Day two in Atani was a big learning experience for the team. Strong emphasis was placed on process observation and that enabled us to gather information with which to decide on the criteria for stratification. Although there were many difference between the participants, four divisions were considered the most serious and used as the basis for stratification: age, occupation, gender and social organisation. Considerable differences existed between kinship groupings, but we were advised, and took heed, that making it a basis for stratification could be very dangerous.

In the end, we had six groups: youth, women, the elderly, farmers, fisherfolk and members of co-operative societies, who we invited to separate evening sub-sessions. Other considerations we used for selecting individuals to invite to sub-sessions included:

- how vocal and aggressive they appeared to be;
- how articulate they appeared to be;
- whether an individual appeared to be handicapped or unable to express him or herself; and,
- individuals who had headed organised groups in the past.

Facilitating roles and lessons of the approach

A combination of difference, fear and apathy can lead to ineffective participation in diverse groups through the suppression of views, concerns and comments at an open PRA meeting. For instance, women in their own sub-sessions complained bitterly about being made to sit with the men (and their husbands) in the same PRA session.

A major cause of conflict, not identifiable during the plenary PRA sessions, was historical factors. These became clear only during the sub-sessions and related mainly to the presence within the groups of key players who were perceived to have been culpable in past community development efforts and community organisations that were unsuccessful. To some participants, the fact that we allowed these people into the forum meant our workshops had lower credibility.

Participants' perspectives and understanding of the rationale of the team's visit varied considerably. For example, some participants believed that people who asked too many questions were delaying what they thought was the ultimate purpose of the workshop - the distribution of funds and fishing equipment. Allied to this was the fact that some participants took the workshop to be 'another workshop' and that it was just one of the usual exercises that would not produce tangible benefits. The sub-sessions offered us an opportunity to correct some of these views.

Stratified groups helped the team to identify areas of shared interests, areas of partially shared interests and areas of disagreement and of unique interest among the groups. Insights gained from the stratified PRA sub-sessions were useful during facilitation, enabling us to present alternative view points during

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

discussions within the larger, heterogeneous group sessions. This allowed team members to understand and even predict the reactions of individuals during the main workshop sessions and to ask more conciliatory questions, which helped mediate and negotiate compromise. Through this 'backstopping', existing and potential deadlocks and communication gaps between various groups were reduced and, in some cases, even eliminated.

Strengths and weaknesses of the approach

Stratification successfully prevents the sequestering of ideas that are perceived to be inferior. It permits people with a commonality of interests, concerns and worries to explore them with greater enthusiasm and rigour in a trusting atmosphere. It creates opportunities for those that are more effective in smaller groups to operate. Therefore, stratification improves participation.

On the other hand, stratification can be objected to on a number of grounds. Determination of who to include in any of the strata was somewhat arbitrary, based on a very rapid appraisal of the characteristics of the participants. It is possible that the 'most qualified' representatives in each stratum were left out.

We found that running sub-sessions can be very demanding on the expertise of facilitators and resource persons. When conducting a sub-session, they have to present the views of groups not represented, so that they can effectively stimulate the other side's reactions and excite the participants on relevant issues for discussion. Sometimes, facilitators may have overplayed this role and forgotten to give neutral reactions, as a third party, which is a crucial element in PRA facilitation. Stratification of meetings was done without the knowledge of the other relevant groups. This might have worked against fuller dialoguing.

Another important limitation of this approach is that there is rarely enough time to hold consultations with representatives of all identified groups. We could only talk with at most three of the six identified groups per

village. Finally there is the risk that participants in the sub-sessions might forge alliances and come to the main PRA session armed with sub-agendas, the assertion of which could be done in a manner considered unacceptable to other groups.

Conclusion

Stratification of PRA sessions may not be a perfect tool, but it is worthy of deeper examination. Its application, if managed well, can certainly benefit PRA in conflict-ridden settings. Rather than focus on its undemocratic properties, we ought to appreciate its potentials for eliciting views and perspectives that would ordinarily be suppressed in general interactive situations. A key challenge for the future lies in identifying and developing methods and approaches for stratification, that are non-repetitive and at the same time, seen to be democratic and transparent. Stratification demonstrates sensitivity to diversity and can, depending on the context, provide a key to understanding more precisely the way in which the power relations of the community work. In the words of Robert Chambers, we should learn to see processes and to facilitate them. Stratification should therefore complement, not overthrow, the main sessions.

- **C.U. Okoye**, Research Fellow, Centre for Rural Development and Co-operatives, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

Stratified PRA platforms: a response from Somesh Kumar

There has been a common tendency to treat communities as homogeneous. It is assumed that whoever has come forward and interacted with the outsiders, represents the community. Differences in people's perceptions and priorities can therefore go unnoticed. Sometimes, and depending upon local people's perceptions about the possible outcome of these PRA exercises, they express their different priorities and interests. There are instances of such exercises leading to such quarrels and conflict that the exercises have to be abandoned. Okoye here has raised the important issues of dealing with diversity of interest groups during PRA exercises. He also shares with us his

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

attempts in terms of 'stratified PRA' to deal with heterogeneity and reflects on the implications of such an approach.

PRA practitioners are generally conscious of ensuring that the 'voiceless' express themselves. Special efforts are made to ensure the participation of the marginalised. Women generally find it difficult to express themselves in the presence of men and outsiders. Now, it is a common practice to try and understand women's perspectives in separate fora. Experience has shown that using the same methods with men and women separately, and then comparing the outputs, not only enhances the outsider's understanding but also leads to gender sensitization in the community.

In certain situations, there are groups whose interests conflict. Many practitioners have found it useful to go for a PRA approach that brings together the different interest groups. One of the strengths of PRA has been its suitability for recognising and supporting diversity, complexity and empowering the weaker and marginalised.

Breaking into interest groups provides valuable insights into individual perspectives. However, special effort needs to be made by the facilitators for the divergent perspectives to converge so that some common analysis and action can take place. As PRA practitioners, our aim is not just to understand different perspectives but to facilitate the process of analysis and action at the local level. If not handled properly, the PRA process can lead to increased conflict among and between the various groups. Who should decide the criteria for stratification? Should there be stratification for all issues or just a few? The answers seems obvious. The local people should decide the criteria for stratification and only for issues where perspectives of different interest groups are required. 'Stratified PRA' sub-sessions should be clearly and strategically directed towards bridging the gaps amongst various interest groups.

Heterogeneity becomes a problem with training groups as well. At times officials of different departments are trained together. Groups can be formed to work on different tasks either randomly or based on special characteristics,

needs, interests etc. Homogenous groups are often formed when the aim is to get different perspectives for the problems. Random groups are generally preferred when the focus is on commonality of action. The random group provides opportunity for sharing varied experiences. The specialised interest groups can lead to hardening of prejudices if not facilitated well.

As Okuye notes, PRA practitioners have always strived to use some sort of 'stratified PRA'. Robert Chambers calls it 'purposive sampling in non-statistical sense' (Whose Reality Counts?, p152). Okoye has given it a name and initiated debate on an important methodological concern. This can be a helpful tool in certain circumstances. However, a lot will depend on the context, culture and issues concerned. Above all, it should be remembered that practitioners are the best judge at all times.

• **Somesh Kumar**, PRAXIS, 12 Pataliputra Colony, Patna 800 013, Bihar, India. Email: praxis@actionaidindia.org