

Social mapping at Thenganayakanahalli village

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Introduction

Participatory research is a process of collective, community based participatory investigation, education and action for structural and personal transformation. It is a method of investigating problems involving participation of marginalised people to identify their problems, for providing solutions and taking collective action. Unlike traditional research, participatory research ensures that people being studied or the intended beneficiaries of the research have substantial control over, and participation in the research.

The fourth PRA Thematic workshop organised by PRAXIS, from 5th to 15th September 2000 in Bangalore, India carried a module on Participatory Research (PR) and Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA). Six days of classroom training was followed by an intensive two days of fieldwork. Our team went to a village named Thenganayakanahalli, approximately 50 km. from the city of Bangalore, India.

This article focuses on the process adopted while doing social mapping and our, the trainees' learnings. Social mapping was only one of the tools used in the study.

Social mapping at Thenganayakanahalli

I started the social map in the village. We had staff from a local NGO to help us with translation and logistics. When around 10 people gathered, mostly old men, we explained to them the objective of our visit and our plans. The people selected a house that belonged to Laxman, a Gowda (upper caste) that was placed in the centre of the village. The people gathered chose to do the map in the veranda of the house, which was big and cemented. Some women community members who lived in the adjacent houses were also encouraged to participate.

We explained the purpose of our visit (being academic in nature) and requested them to draw a map of the village. It was interesting to see that a young 14-year old boy named Gopal picked up a chalk and started drawing the map. Krishna, a man from the lower caste, joined him. In the course of drawing the map, some more women also joined in and contributed. The map was corrected from time to time by the village elders.

The map was completed by drawing the roads, houses, water sources, primary, middle and secondary schools and the anganwadi. The participants were requested to help us identify the different types of houses; houses belonging to different castes groups in the village, women-headed households, resources and so on. Different coloured chalks and symbols were used to identify the different houses.

The participants then marked the poor households in the village based on their definition of poverty, *"the state when one does not have any land or ancestral property, has to go for daily wage labour and has large a family to feed"*. Based on the definition, the villagers classified the houses in the village as very poor (six households) poor (thirty-six households) and well off households. Once the map was complete, we probed various issues like the structure of the houses, caste dynamics in the village, houses that were made with government loans, water sources for homes and fields, education at school and so on. This whole process took around two hours. The copy of the social map copied by us is enclosed as figure 1.1.

The map when analysed threw some light on the structural dynamics in the village. Most of the schedule caste and women-headed households were the ones which were poor, had houses away from the main road and were poorer in quality (katcha houses). This meant that these households were landless and depended on daily wage labour. It was these houses that had poor accessibility to water, electricity and even education. The social map created a common orientation and understanding not only for us but also for the villagers. It helped the villagers and us in identifying issues that needed more reflection.

Social map of Thenganayakanahalli

Learnings

We, the trainees, found the social map an interesting and enjoyable tool to involve and engage community members in discussion about their village. We used the social map to build rapport, understand the physical structure of the village in respect to caste and gender relation, wealth/well-being ranking, and identified issues that need in-depth information to firm up the study design further. Our learnings were as follows:

Limitations

Some of the major limitations of the process and the tool were:

Time

The process needed to be rushed as we had only two days to complete the fieldwork. This limited our understanding of the map, as we did not have time to probe in details on various issues. We also realised that the people in the villages were busy with their own work and we were actually preventing them from working by demanding their time to create the social map. Hence we needed to stay longer in the village to complete the map (including drawing, probing and triangulation) at a time suitable for the people, without encroaching on their productive time. Time became a limiting factor in the participation of women too, as women in the villages not only went to the field but also had to do household work. For women, most of their free time is their rest time and we would be demanding part of that to involve women.

Social dynamics

The first activity of creating the map was done in the balcony of a house, which was in the centre of the village. However, the house belonged to an upper caste villager, in the upper caste locality, and so brought in more participation from upper caste people. Though there were few members from the schedule caste, there was no representation from the Lambani tribe. This essentially meant that we were doing the poverty assessment with upper caste people who were landholders and economically better off than the rest of the community members. This selection of place and time limited participation of poorer, landless, lower caste people who are the most important participants in a poverty assessment. The group became sensitive of this issue in the later exercises.

Language

Not knowing the local language was also a limitation. This resulted in a communication gap between the translator and us leading to miscommunication with the participants. Lots of time was spent on clarifying issues and retranslating, creating further confusion among the participants. The fact that we did not have any prior meeting with the translators (NGO workers) further complicated the situation as the translators started playing the role of participants rather than translator or facilitator. They had to be reminded from time to time about their role.

Participation of women

Gender issues can be totally neglected if women are not involved in the mapping. To involve women we need to take care of the time and place where the map was made. Even though few women were present while making the map and the facilitators were sensitive to seek their active participation, they were overruled from time to time by men and were not given space to voice their opinion or

their interest. This can lead to a very masculine map. We felt the best practical way to involve women was to do a separate map with the women and include their interests in the planning. Unfortunately, we were unable to make a map with the women separately.

Lack of complete information

Though it took a long time to make the social map, we realised it did not provide us with complete information. It did help us to identify issues but we needed to interview the map and use other tools to learn more in order to fill the gaps in information. Though social mapping is a good tool to develop a visual map of the community with people's participation, it needs to be complemented with other tools to fill the information and understanding gaps.

Impact of the process on the trainees

The trainees belonged to different countries and were from different professional backgrounds even though we were all working in the development sector. We all found that the social map created a visual representation of the village, which was understood by everyone and threw open many issues. The social map enabled the people in the villages to define their understanding of poverty and analyse the poverty status in the village. This tool can be used not only for understanding the village reality but also for planning with the people for the village. The map clearly showed us where we needed to work if we wanted to reach the poorest of the poor in the village. The process also taught us what we needed to do if we wanted to hear women's voices and seek their participation. We as trainees learnt the use of social mapping in participatory poverty assessment, skills to create a social map so as to enhance participatory involvement of people who are normally left out, like the low caste and women. However it cannot be rushed and needs to be followed by semi structured interviews and probing. The information generated by a social map needs to be triangulated by using other tools.

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