

# Does PRA make sense in democratic societies?

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## Introduction

Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) approaches and methods have a long history in development planning in less developed countries (Chambers 1992). In recent years, PLA approaches have also been promoted for participatory development planning in rural areas of industrialised countries with functioning democratic institutions, mainly Switzerland, UK and Germany. This paper draws on experiences of applying Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in a one-week planning workshop in a village in Northern Germany and asks whether or not PRA is an appropriate instrument for participatory community development in societies with functioning local democratic institutions.

## PLA in Europe?

Not only rural regions in less developed countries, but also those in industrialised societies of the North, currently face severe processes of structural social and economic change. People have to cope with the diversification of their once traditional village society and with a loss of identity. In this particularly unstable situation, participatory planning of community development aims at improving communication processes between different groups of people. The hypothesis is that by involving people in the process of their own development, participatory approaches contribute to

strengthening community feeling and mutual trust. Participatory planning methods using participatory rural appraisal (PRA) are currently being tested in selected villages in Germany as an instrument to enhance stakeholder participation in communal planning.

Practitioners and academics in Germany advocating PLA approaches for community development often stress that people, especially in rural areas, feel alienated from and are tired of politics. They state that PLA approaches could generate a positive momentum among local people to address their needs, while the formal institutions of local governance often would not be able to do so any more. However, such assumptions need to be carefully verified in the field, before PLA becomes promoted on a larger scale for community development in the industrialised societies with functioning democratic institutions.

This article assesses the experiences of a one-week participatory assessment and planning workshop 'Planning for the Future' in Mühlen, a village in Northern Germany. What are the advantages of using methodologies and approaches based on PLA compared to other established instruments of stakeholder participation? The guiding question that this paper discusses is whether or not it makes sense to advocate PLA approaches, in particular PRA, as an innovative instrument of stakeholder participation in the industrialised afflu-

ent societies of the North, in which functioning democratic institutions of local governance are in place.

### **PRA workshop in Mühlen, a village in northern Germany**

In 1998, the Federal Government of Germany initiated three pilot action research projects to develop perspectives for rural regions in Germany that suffer from environmental degradation. One of the regions selected was Vechta and Cloppenburg in the state of Lower Saxony. The area is characterised by large-scale industrialised farming. The intensity of farming seriously affected the regional land and water resources. This situation impedes or slows down any further extension of livestock farming.

A research institute from the University of Goettingen in Germany scientifically supported the dialogue process of the pilot project and initiated a stakeholder dialogue to discuss the environmental problems and social constraints of industrialised farming in Vechta-Cloppenburg. As a complementary step, the stakeholders involved in the dialogue thought it useful to include a bottom-up process in discussing the future of farming activities and rural development in the research area. As a first step, the university, in collaboration with an independent German consulting company specialising in rural development, agreed to carry out a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) workshop. This workshop was to meet two objectives: to initiate a participatory planning process in one model community of the research area, and to provide local perceptions on rural development and the role of farming for the environment and community development for the dialogue process. They randomly selected the village of Mühlen with approximately 3,000 inhabitants in the Landkreis Vechta for such a model workshop.

The consulting company received the commission to carry out the workshop and hired a team of eleven facilitators. About half of them had a background in participatory development approaches in less developed countries, and had substantial experience in applying PRA and RRA tools. The other facilitators were students or graduates of geography, agriculture and social sciences and received a brief theoretical training in PRA prior to the workshop. Eight facilitators were female, three male.

The team leader organised the PRA workshop and contacted various key persons in Mühlen and in the local administration. Mühlen is not an independent administrative entity, but belongs to the small town of Steinfeld. There is mistrust between administrators and politicians in Steinfeld and the local population in Mühlen, which has its roots in the history of administrative reforms in the 1970s, when formerly

independent small villages became submerged into larger administrative units. Whilst it was extremely important to include key local people as resource persons the consent of local administrators in Steinfeld was also necessary. Key local people included the local deputy mayor from Mühlen and various people from societies of the Roman-Catholic parish (which still exerts a considerable influence in the village).

The preparatory phase revealed that the different stakeholders had different perceptions about the purpose and procedure of the PRA workshop. The commissioning party (the state-sponsored research project) expected to gain new insights into the feelings and aspirations of the local population about environmental problems related to intensive agriculture. The local administration also took this view. These two institutional key stakeholders understood the workshop to be research or an opinion poll – a rapid rural appraisal (RRA) – rather than the starting point for a participatory planning process. The consulting company, however, understood the commission to be the beginning of a participatory planning process in one model village. The population was confused about the real commission of the facilitator team, and since key actors, such as the local administration, only half-heartedly supported the project, the workshop became more a rapid rural appraisal (RRA) than a participatory rural appraisal (PRA).

### **Methods and procedure**

In the course of a PRA exercise, the intensive schedule of activities, interviews and workshops creates a momentum and dynamic, which is hard to reach with other planning methods. The team of facilitators encourage people to talk about their affairs, something many have given up doing, due to frustration about village politics. The facilitators can also stimulate discussion processes between groups, which normally might not talk much to each other. People and social groups, which are often left apart, might get a chance to bring up their ideas. It is assumed that this assures that the identified projects mirror largely the real interests of the citizens. The fundamental question is then how to use the momentum for follow-up and how to really get things done after all the discussion.

The PRA workshop in Mühlen started on a Sunday with the arrival of the team of facilitators. The deputy mayor guided the team in a brief informal walk through the village. This helped to gain a first idea of the social and economic environment, to raise awareness of the work and to gain first contacts with the population. In the next five days, the team utilised various rapid appraisal techniques to collect information and to provide discussion forums for different social

groups. The rapid appraisal and moderation techniques were adapted to suit the circumstances of an affluent society. The three main tools utilised were:

#### **Kitchen table walks (Küchentischgespräche)**

These were aimed at collecting a variety of opinions and perceptions, which possibly would not be voiced in a public forum. Sub-teams of two facilitators randomly selected and interviewed households in the various sections of the village. The facilitators asked about what people liked or disliked in their village, how they perceived the past developments and what were their future aspirations and fears with regard to their community life. The interviews were informal and held in a relaxed atmosphere. The facilitator team had not announced the household interviews prior to their arrival, so at each doorstep, the two facilitators had to convince the interviewees about the purpose of the PRA workshop and the actual interview.

#### **SWOT workshops (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats)**

With different social groups from the village, the facilitators discussed the social cohesion in the village, the position of different social groups, their own perceptions of village life and the expectations and wishes for the future development of Mühlen. The team of facilitators and key resource persons agreed upon four such workshops to be conducted with young people, farmers, young mothers and Germans from the former Soviet Union ('Aussiedler') respectively. These four groups were those with particular social constraints in community life.

#### **Interviews and discussions**

In interviews and discussions with key informants, the team clarified open questions, collected essential data about history, environmental and social problems, and tried to generate a sense of responsibility for social action.

The approach was unstructured and depended largely on making unexpected discoveries by chance (serendipity principle). A lot of information was gathered in a short time, and it was essential to properly document and analyse this pile of data. The team of facilitators elaborated an evaluation matrix, with each team documenting the key issues of the day for selected subject areas, i.e. social life, infrastructure, environment and health, agriculture and economy etc. The team met daily to discuss the main insights and hot issues of the day to derive an investigative strategy for the following day.

As the final event of the PRA week, the facilitators presented the results to the villagers, thus 'showing the

mirror' to the local population. The team used innovative tools such as theatre and role-play in combination with short thematic presentations covering selected key issues. The main purpose was to show the different views, perceptions and attitudes in the village. It became apparent that not all villagers share the same opinion about key topics, as was often assumed by villagers. Some things were rarely openly discussed, or only talked about at the local pub ('Stammtisch') among close friends. The final workshop was therefore an important forum for exchanging different views and deriving first steps for further action. The results of the workshop were documented in a brief report.

#### **Lessons learnt from Mühlen and other places**

The participation and commitment of the people in the PRA workshop in Mühlen was not very promising, especially in the final evening session. One main reason might be that the initiation and preparation phase was very short (two months) and that the PRA was externally driven: the local administration and civil society groups did not feel an urgent need for PRA - it was offered to the village free of charge by an outside funding agency. One observation is that PRA seems to be less successful in cases where people do not feel the need for change (as in Mühlen) or where the community is very heterogeneous and some social groups are excluded from the process by other more powerful groups, which try to defend their own privileges. Hürlimann & Jufer (1995) observed in Switzerland that PRA was efficient in cases where income was relatively evenly distributed, while in cases with substantial differences, the group of people in the upper ranks of income feared for their privileges and tried to prevent any sort of changes in the community.

Experience from Germany and Switzerland shows that it is an inherent danger of PRA and also of other approaches of PLA that they might raise high expectations which are hard to meet in the given administrative and political frame conditions (Delius & Currie 1999; Hürlimann & Kofer 1995). The intensive workshop atmosphere can create excitement and expectations that changes will occur. Nevertheless, there is a certain tendency that as soon as the outsiders leave the place, everybody goes back to 'business as usual': planning procedures require a long time, are still not transparent, and funds might be difficult to acquire. The traditional political actors might regain terrain in the further advance of projects. PRAs often end up in a phase of disillusionment or frustration. The follow-up phase is a period of cooling down to realistic dimensions (Hürlimann & Jufer 1995).

Without a clarification of roles, perceptions and interests of different stakeholders and key actors, it is difficult to root

ownership in the local population and in civil society and to find people and institutions to sustain a follow-up process. The question is who actually takes the first step for initiating a PRA workshop, who carries the responsibilities and who provides the funds. Since PRA is still a 'new' method for application in European countries, the idea of starting a PRA process often comes from outside. In many cases, due to its 'model' nature, PRA is initiated and financed by external agencies and research programmes. This raises the question of how we can root local ownership not only among the population, but even more within the local administration. In the case of Mühlen, the local administration did not contribute to the funding of the workshop and neither strongly opposed nor strongly supported the workshop. It would be an important step forward in achieving ownership if local administrative and political bodies took over the funding and overall responsibility for the PRA workshop and its follow-up.

What is mostly lacking is a backstopping support for the long-term process of planning and implementation. Delius & Currell (1999) rightly point out that PRA has to be understood as a mid-term process with a time frame of one to two years. Many structural social, economic or environmental problems, which heavily affect the lives of people in rural areas of Europe, are difficult to solve during a one-week workshop. In Mühlen, for example, one particularly sensitive issue was the integration of Germans coming from the former Soviet Union into the social life of the village. Changes in attitude are hardly achievable within a week, and require continuous efforts through the social work of civil society, charity organisations and the local administration. Another conflict arose about the environmental effects of industrialised livestock farming and land use issues (agricultural versus domestic use). Many such issues are taboo or subject to power plays, and the facilitators found it difficult to raise them within the workshop week without causing trouble. A more long-term oriented mediation process might be more appropriate in such a case (see Siebert & Müller 1999 for an example from Eastern Germany). In this context, it is also essential to note which social groups are really able to participate and to defend their interest in a PRA process and which are not. It is often the poor, or specific groups, such as foreigners and young mothers, who cannot afford the time to participate in workshops, because the opportunity costs of time are too high for them (Korf 2000).

### **Conclusion: Does PRA make sense in societies where democratic institutions are in place?**

Most experiences in PLA approaches have been gained in less

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developed countries (LDC) and it is important to draw lessons from these experiences before testing and applying PLA approaches in rural community planning in Europe. It is in particular the PRA methodology that is now widely applied in community development of LDCs. In PRA, the main involvement in the planning process should come from the local population supported by external or internal facilitators. The aim of the PRA process is to enable communities to analyse their problems, needs and aspirations, to identify possible solutions and to initiate planning and implementation of the chosen solutions. However, from the practice of governmental development co-operation in Africa and Asia, we know that the logic of a planning bureaucracy often clashes with the pragmatism and flexibility required for a truly participatory planning process. Many experiments and models therefore raised high expectations, which could not be fulfilled (Rauch 1996; Alff, Ay & Bauer 1998). In the case of delays, early enthusiasm can swiftly deteriorate into frustration. In Sri Lanka, for example, many villagers feel over-assessed by organisations, but have not seen much progress in their village development (Korf 1999). Participation alone does not yet guarantee successful and efficient solutions for community problems in less developed countries. It is, however, one fundamental precondition.

PLA in affluent societies works under significantly different frame conditions than in less developed countries. Germany has a well-developed system of political instruments that involve local citizens in decision-making and the planning process. Above all, German villagers elect village councils, and in some states, they also elect their mayor directly. In many states, they have the possibility to initiate a local referendum on important issues. Furthermore, public planning processes, e.g. for new roads, new building projects etc. incorporate a stakeholder consultation process. The question that this paper poses is whether or not it is more prudent to utilise these established institutions more intensively, than to advocate PRA and other approaches of PLA that would have yet to be established successfully in affluent societies with democratic governance structures and a strong civil society.

Some practitioners and scientists regard PLA as an instrument to overcome the 'Politikverdrossenheit' (people's disappointment with politics and the subsequent reluctance to get politically involved), since it asks people more directly to voice their opinions and to get involved in a process of change. However, in post-modern affluent societies, many individuals might feel that they do not care much about community development, because it does not really concern their individual life. For them, participating in workshops might then become a burden rather than a worthwhile investment in community development. Most people might deliberately prefer to delegate such decision-making power to elected bodies, since for most of the problems encountered, there are no easy solutions and many people are not ready to invest too much of their time and effort in discussions and meetings. Nevertheless, we can also observe that people get involved in local initiatives and action, if things matter for

them, e.g. in case of environmental pollution. However, such initiatives are often short-term, biased towards the interests of certain groups, and, in many cases, shaped by a few charismatic individuals, who talk much and eloquently dominate the whole process.

The fundamental question is how legitimised PRA processes are in a functional setting of democratically legitimised local governance institutions. If PRA is to be considered as an instrument for people's participation in community development at all, it is essential that it be understood as a complementary instrument to the existing political and administrative institutional arrangements. While civil society actors can take over complementary responsibilities and initiatives, the local administrators and democratically elected bodies need to play a key role in order for PRA processes in community development to become successful in affluent societies.

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