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The trouble with PRA: reflections on dilemmas of quality

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Once a marginal practice battling for recognition, PRA has now become an instrument used by the most powerful of global development institutions. As PRA has spread and been taken up by actors and institutions across the spectrum of development practice, it has taken on a diversity of forms and meanings. In some settings, it has enabled development workers and activists to engage poor and marginalised people in shaping plans, projects, and policies intended for their benefit. In others, it has provoked those working in development agencies and government bureaucracies to rethink and seek to transform their practice. Yet in others still it has become a routinised ritual, a form of legitimisation for decisions that have already been made, and a substitute for longer term enquiry and engagement.

In this article, we draw on findings from the Pathways to Participation project (see Box 1). This project brought together dozens of practitioners to reflect critically on what PRA means to them and to explore some of the challenges posed by the rapid spread and uptake of PRA for issues of integrity and quality.

The dilemmas of spread

The dilemmas for quality posed by the rapid growth and spread of PRA have been a source of debate amongst practitioners since the early 1990s. Despite their representation

Box 1: The Pathways to Participation project

The Pathways to Participation project took stock of PRA ten years on from its explosion in popularity. It encouraged people to reflect on their past experiences and on the current status of PRA, and to look forward for new directions. The project supported research, reflective workshops, video making, and an innovative 'writeshop' for practitioners. It involved collaboration with researchers, development organisations, and networks in China, the Gambia, India, Kenya, Mexico, Nepal, and Vietnam. The project was initiated by the Participation Group at Institute of Development Studies, UK and funded by Sida, DFID, and SDC. A book based on the project, *Pathways to Participation: reflections on PRA*, edited by Andrea Cornwall and Gareth Pratt, will be published in late 2003 by IT Publications. For more information about the project, and free downloads of publications, visit www.ids.ac.uk/particip/research/pathways.html

by some academics (see, for example, Henkel & Stirrat, 2001) as uncritical proselytisers, PRA practitioners have long held reservations about the effects of the popularisation of PRA. International gatherings of practitioners have produced statements of principle, and of concerns about 'abuse' and 'bad practice' (see Absalom et al., 1995, Adhikari et al., 1997). Yet promoting participatory approaches to a sceptical and even hostile audience sat uneasily with open and honest critical reflection. The tension between facing up to the limitations of PRA and PRA practice and convincing development agen-

cies about the merits of participatory development meant that PRA practitioners' own concerns were rarely shared more widely beyond circles of like-minded people.

The enthusiasm of the mid-1990s, as international organisations began to incorporate PRA into their procedures and practices and produce statements and guidelines on participation, has given way to a more cautious appraisal of the effects of institutionalising PRA. And with this, a new mood of critical reflection is emerging. This is marked less by defensiveness and more by a desire to bridge the gap between the rhetoric and realities of participation in development. Concerns have converged on issues of ethics and values, moving beyond earlier, more methodological, debates. Amidst a sharing of these concerns, a more fundamental set of questions arises about what exactly people think PRA is about or for – something over which there is less agreement than might be imagined. In the following sections, we look at some of the different versions of PRA that are around, and at some of the disagreements about what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' practice. We then look in more depth at some of the challenges this raises for attempts to enhance the quality of PRA practice.

Defying definition? Versions of PRA

For both those new to and familiar with PRA, there is no easy answer to the question, what is PRA? Absalom et al. (1995) define PRA as:

A family of approaches and methods to enable rural people to share, enhance, and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan, and to act.

As suggested by this open definition, people draw boundaries about what they consider to be 'PRA' in a variety of ways. For many, PRA is primarily identified with its distinctive visualisation methods – maps, calendars, matrices, and so on. PRA is widely known for the use of these kinds of visual representations with and by groups of people in poor communities, often using local materials on the ground, and symbols rather than writing. Sequences of tools are often applied to create general analyses of the life and conditions of people. But methods can also be applied in a more focused way to explore a particular sector or issue, whether it is views on a planned irrigation project, or people's parenting styles. As groups of people create representations of their knowledge together, they discuss the topic at hand, and share views and ideas. For some, PRA ought to culminate in making action plans in which people define what they would like to change and how they would go about it.

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Not everyone views the use of visual representations as essential to PRA. There are practitioners who hold focus group discussions or community meetings and do not use any diagrams, but describe their practice as PRA. There are also professionals who administer semi-structured interviews or short questionnaires to individuals and refer to their practice as PRA – even if few PRA practitioners would regard this as legitimate.

Others regard PRA as a wider approach to the way in which development is and should be done, which suggests ways of going about any task from creating a system of information management for NGOs, to managing programmes. One Kenyan practitioner said, 'PRA is anything that will enhance more people to get involved, and will allow more people to give their ideas'. For an NGO worker in Pakistan, 'Everything we do is PRA': from using bicycles instead of four wheel drives, to allowing members of credit groups to make their own decisions about how to use loans without interference from NGO staff (Anwar, forthcoming). According to this viewpoint, PRA is more than techniques – it is about underlying values and about the attitudes and behaviour of professionals towards those they work with, within as well as beyond the organisations they work for.

Some talk of PRA as a 'way of life': as a starting point for changing the ways in which development work is done, by directly addressing relationships of power which subordinate local people and local knowledge. Practitioners who subscribe to this view commonly complain that the attitudes and behaviour of many PRA practitioners fall short of their ideal – that professionals are simply substituting PRA for the tools they used to use without changing the ways in which they think about local people, and without changing the way they conceive their own role as people working for social change.

Some distinguish between PRA and PLA¹, some between RRA and PRA, each positioning their version as the 'right' and

¹ Ironically, when IIED decided to change the name of this journal to *PLA Notes* there were fears that PLA would become the next acronym – and sure enough, in some quarters, it did!

most right-on' one. Just as RRA was disparaged in the early 1990s for being too technical and mechanical, so PRA began to be dismissed by some as the 1990s wore on as a one-off event, or focused only on diagramming, in contrast with the more process-oriented, methodologically eclectic PLA. In reality, different labels can be used for practices that are essentially very similar indeed. These labels are used to define and defend forms of practice that fit with what those who claim them think of as 'participation'. Quite how varied people's notions of what being 'participatory' is all about was one of the most striking aspects of the Pathways project.

Locating 'bad practice'

Practitioners often complain about the 'misuse' or even 'abuse' of PRA. Given the range of opinions about what PRA is or ought to be, and the diversity of practices that are labelled 'PRA', there would seem to be ample scope for criticism. Closer inspection reveals some rather different views about the nature of the problem.

Rigid versus sloppy practice

For some, what is at issue is an over-emphasis on methods. As a critic in Kenya put it, 'There's nothing about attitude and everything about the tools' (Cornwall et al., 2001). Their version of the problem is that PRA methods have become like a questionnaire survey or focus groups: another tool to add to the arsenal of conventional research techniques. 'Bad practice', then, comes to consist of the use of particular strings of methods in pre-designed sequences, applications that are judged 'mechanical'. Often the overarching purpose of such applications is implicitly also the subject of critique, whether the 'extraction' of information or the use of a particular formula to arrive at a determinate product such as a 'Community Action Plan'. In Kenya, a number of people commented on the pressure to follow a set routine in which they applied a series of recognised PRA tools for any work that is commissioned, regardless of their applicability. As one put it, 'PRA tools should not be followed religiously', yet they often are (Cornwall et al., 2001). A Nepali practitioner voiced a commonly heard critique:

They think that PRA is a good thing and so they apply some tools, and then they leave back, and after some time there is nothing. It is PRA for PRA... I think it is because they are more results oriented. They want to show that they have done so many PRAs in so many villages. And sometimes it has become ritual. (Pratt, 2001)

A different camp of practitioners identifies the opposite problem. They highlight the dangers of advice to 'use your

own best judgement' and 'adapt to the circumstances'. Their concerns centre around what they see as sloppy practice: not cross-checking information, not using a range of methods with a range of actors to triangulate findings, or not producing a 'Community Action Plan' at the end of a PRA exercise to formalise consensus.

Empowerment versus data collection

The tension between emphasising improvisation and innovation versus rigour and consistency is only one of many axes that divides practitioners. Further complications arise when we acknowledge that people use PRA for very different purposes. Many practitioners think that PRA should be empowering, and complain that most PRA practice does not live up to such claims. They argue that it is just used for data collection, and that this is wrong. As a manager in an international NGO that has been influential in introducing and supporting PRA in Nepal said:

Many people have used PRA, even now, as basically an exploratory tool, rather than as an empowering tool. Therefore many community have not benefited from the empowerment aspect of PRA. They might have benefited having one or two projects in their area, but the real empowerment... hasn't come because it has just been used to explore, an extractive tool. (Pratt, 2001)

In Kenya, a long-standing practitioner now based in a donor organisation contended that, 'As more people come to use PRA they're reducing it to a mechanism or one-off intervention' (Cornwall et al., 2001). Many Mexican practitioners argue that PRA fails to offer any empowering process or to provide the means to question unjust, racist, or antidemocratic structures, observing that it can be used in even the most authoritarian regime (Moya Garcia & Way, 2003). Many counter-posed PRA as an apolitical methodology introduced from America and Britain against Mexican methodologies grounded in explicitly political ideas like self-determination, informal education, and consciousness raising (Moya Garcia & Way 2003).

Others see using PRA as a one-off exercise to collect data, or to serve the information needs of project managers or donors, as a valid pursuit. In fact, some are very enthusiastic about PRA as a substitute for questionnaire surveys in project appraisal, and do not make any claims about it being empowering. A senior manager in a UN project in Nepal, for example, argued that:

Especially in the beginning of the programme... we need the baseline to monitor or assess the effects of the project... To collect

Participants in a Pathways to Participation workshop perform a play about ethical dilemmas in PRA practice. Others were invited to intervene and show how to do things differently



that information, projects mostly take a sample, then use a questionnaire survey. It doesn't come up with a good report. People get lost in data collection. This approach is still going on. We tried to introduce PRA, because it is very fast, very informative, and works case to case. It is very specific to a certain area, a specific place, a specific community... It gives quick results. You can have a lot of information and it is more than 90% reliable... (Pratt, 2001)

Likewise, some Mexican practitioners argue that PRA is:

... 'Efficient' in improving project design... These methodologies give better results at a lower cost and in a shorter time frame; an assessment applied generally more to PRA than other [participatory methodologies]. (Moya Garcia & Way, 2003)

Attitudes and behaviour

For some practitioners, debating about empowerment versus data collection misses the point, as the purpose of PRA is transforming relationships between professionals and the people they are meant to serve whatever the activity. A common complaint is that practitioners have not adopted the right attitudes and behaviour, as emphasised in international discourses of PRA. But one still finds disagreement – for some, the problem is that practitioners display the right attitudes and behaviour in their interactions with other professionals, but do not display them when doing PRA with community members. For others, it is the other way round: people are nice enough when they are in communities, but revert to being dominating and insensitive in their offices or homes. One long-standing Kenyan participation practitioner highlighted the contradictions here:

One minute you are this very concerned, sensitive, development practitioner who is keen to listen to people, and the next minute you scream at the driver or the office staff, or the way you treat your wife or spouse'. (Cornwall et al., 2001)

'Practitioners disagree over how PRA should be practiced and what purpose it should be used for, and thus, at a very fundamental level, they don't agree on what PRA is. Faced with these kinds of differences, arriving at criteria by which to assess quality is going to be extremely hard'

A Nepali practitioner similarly observed:

People say very beautiful things, beautiful words. People write very beautiful phrases and sentences using participatory approach of development.... But while looking back to him or her and these activities at office, maybe at home, the approach is not being practised. (Pratt, 2001)

One man's meat is another man's poison

Practitioners disagree over how PRA should be practiced and what purpose it should be used for, and thus, at a very fundamental level, they don't agree on what PRA is. Faced with these kinds of differences, arriving at criteria by which to assess quality is going to be extremely hard. 'One man's meat is another man's poison' as the popular adage goes.

There remains lots of confusion about how to set the boundaries around PRA, and practitioners find themselves torn between calling practice that does not live up to their approval an 'abuse' of PRA or saying that it is not PRA at all. By labelling practices they do not approve of as not being 'real PRA', practitioners are able to continue to defend a version of PRA that could be what they want it to be: and, with it, their ideals – far as these ideals may be from much of what is actually going on around them. An influential practitioner, trainer, and networker in Nepal put his finger on the normative aspects of debates about the nature of PRA, arguing that if PRA is not used to pursue the alleviation of poverty for the poorest, then 'that is not PRA – or, I don't know, maybe it is PRA **but not the kind of PRA we want.**' (our emphasis).

Good practice is a shared responsibility

Addressing concerns about quality has become ever more difficult as PRA has spread. Burgeoning numbers of consultants now offer PRA as part of their portfolios. Manuals, web resources, and a range of courses offer recipes for practice.

Networks struggle to keep track of the sheer volume of people who now lay claim to being 'PRA practitioners'. Growing donor and lender requirements for stakeholder participation translate into 'doing PRA' to inform policies and projects. PRA is being practiced so widely that there are a staggering number of people influencing other people's practice, and determining what doing PRA 'properly' might mean and whether specific examples of practice – their own or others – live up to their view of good practice. In any single case of practice, many people are responsible for the way PRA is done – from the person funding the work, to the people in the organisation behind the facilitator, to the facilitator themselves, to the diverse participants who take part in the PRA exercise. Things are more messy and complex than any ladder of participation can convey. And this messiness gives rise to a whole range of competing versions of what 'good quality' PRA might actually involve.

The responsibility for the quality of PRA practice is, and will continue to be, diffuse. No single player can determine what others around them mean when they say they're doing 'PRA'. Even their own practice is to some extent out of their hands given the market for PRA and the compromises they may make as a consequence. Networks may exert peer pressure on their members but can't do anything about those who don't join up. Trainers may insist on lengthy, field-based, training courses, and find themselves undercut by those offering quick results. Consultants may turn down contracts for what they see as shoddy PRA work, and find that dozens of others are more than willing to accept. Organisations might use the right language and commission 'a PRA' because it has become expected of them, but lack any basic commitment to following through on what emerges. Community members may skilfully repeat what they know they are expected to say, rather than what they really think, having rehearsed their lines over a PRA map in the pursuit of funding many times before.

Addressing the quality crisis – practitioners' suggestions

There is no turning back, in the sense that people will continue to hold conflicting views not just about how to do PRA well, but even what PRA is, as we have argued above. Discussions over quality are a never-ending process, with many concerned actors jostling with one another to gain an upper hand in setting boundaries around good practice. Far from seeing these debates and discussions as futile, given the impossibility of consensus, practitioners view debating the quality of PRA, and seeing their ideas translated into practice, as something worth fighting for. They are concerned about the way that their practice, and that of others, affects

Box 2: Steps to start up a participatory process using an ad hoc ethical code

- The external team defines its concept of participation and the level it wishes to achieve in the process.
- The team defines its 'non-negotiables' and communicates them to other actors within the project, at the same time learning theirs.
- The actors both internal and external to the participatory process are open about their intentions, aims, and legitimate interests.
- Focused efforts are made to deal with the obstacles encountered when trying to define and follow an ethical code.
- All maintain an open mind vis-à-vis the different values of each culture, especially between the external team and local cultures.

Source: Moya Garcia & Way, 2003

development in the places they work.

Practitioners can think of a range of constructive mechanisms for continuing the quality debate. Many hold very strong views about training, and how it should be conducted to influence new practitioners' ideas about good practice. They view it as important to document and share their PRA experiences, and thus to debate the relative merit of different forms of practice in specific contexts. Networks have been formed around the world for which this is a primary aim. Some practitioners go further, and suggest that agreeing minimum standards for practice, guidelines for best practice, or codes of ethics to which they hold themselves or one another to account would improve the situation. In reality, networks of practitioners find it difficult to come up with such guidelines given the variety of views they hold, the variety of the contexts they work in, and the realities of the market for PRA. Suggestions of regulation can also alienate many practitioners for whom innovation and diversity is fundamental to PRA. Despite these difficulties, practitioners in Nepal sign up to a code of ethics when they join the network NEPAN. Practitioners in Mexico and Kenya have attempted to negotiate guidelines for good practice in the course of the Pathways project. Mexican practitioners suggested separate guidelines for short-term, and medium-term interventions. They also suggested creating ad hoc ethical codes to suit each case of practice (see Box 2).

Practitioners are also very conscious of the way that their practice is shaped by their own organisations, or the way that donors fund their work. They have many ideas about the ways these organisations should take responsibility for supporting good PRA practice. There are some who wish their own organisations would formulate agreed guidelines for good practice, and hold all their staff responsible. A network of practitioners in Bangladesh issued guidelines to donors commissioning PRA with some simple questions to use. Some of the questions would help to catch out

Figure 1: Critical self-reflection is an important ingredient in quality PRA



IFAD, ANGOC and IIRR (2001)

unscrupulous consultants lying about their qualifications in PRA, while others would help the donor to be more realistic about what kind of time consultants would need. Practitioners talk about the general need to educate donors so that they develop a clearer idea of what they are asking for when they commission participatory work, and what resources and time frames are realistic for the purpose.

Critical reflection in pursuit of quality

None of these attempts to define and defend good practice presents a complete solution. No one has the power to determine the behaviour of the many people that influence PRA practice. But our experience in the Pathways project affirmed that PRA practitioners value these debates over what PRA is,

and how to do it well. Critical reflection is seen by many practitioners as a dynamic way to continually learn and improve their practice, whether through being interviewed, attending a brief workshop or a retreat, writing their own reflections, or hearing or reading the critical reflections of others. Practitioners find reward and support when they discover colleagues who share their values and ideals through debates about quality and ethics. And even when they disagree, through argument they can clarify their own views on good quality practice. The most serious crisis in the quality of PRA practice will come when practitioners lose their interest in, and passion for, debating what good PRA practice means. Our experience in the Pathways to Participation project suggests that day is far off.

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