

Tips for trainers

by LI OU

Semi-circle seating arrangement for a women's group discussion during the field training on Participatory Community Development Planning for the China-Netherlands Poverty Alleviation Project (CNPAP), Anhui Province, China, 2001

PRA and other participatory approaches and methodologies have been used in China since the early 1990s, mainly in internationally funded projects. In the last few years more and more international GOs and NGOs have requested their Chinese counterparts to apply PRA in project planning and implementation. Efforts have been made by Chinese practitioners to adapt PRA to the Chinese situation. However, it has not yet been institutionalised or accepted and applied by the mainstream.

Although China has gone quite fast in the reform, the top-down approach of the central planning economy is still followed extensively by local government, due to the lagging-behind of political reform. PRA application is a radical change and almost completely different from the top-down approach in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviour it advocates. Therefore, as a PRA trainer, you have to be very careful when developing PRA training workshops to accommodate or adapt the participatory approach and methodologies to the political, social, and cultural context in China, and to develop ways of overcoming possible resistance to the new ideas and methods.

Show how the participatory approach is relevant to national development strategy

PRA training can be divided into three sections:

- 'Why' apply PRA?
- 'What' is PRA?
- How' to do PRA

The 'Why' section is very important for project staff and line agency specialists in China, who have been trained with, and worked so long under, the top-down



approach, to make the necessary changes in ideas, attitude, and behaviour. To explain why PRA should be followed in China, we tried to accommodate the participatory approach into the development strategy of the nation.

China had identified sustainable development as one of the national strategies in middle of 1990s. So when you say that the introduction and application of PRA aim at the realisation of sustainable development, the participants will feel or know that the objective is accordant with the national development strategy and not a completely foreign one. After the first doubts or rejection of the new ideas or change are expressed, you can present the internationally recognised comprehensive objectives of the Sustainable Development, and point out that the economic and environmental ones have been paid attention to in China, but social equity and technological appropriateness or suitability have been neglected by policy makers, planners, and government officials,

particularly at local level.

Then you can present the cases studied by yourself or other researchers to show the ineffectiveness or inability of the top-down approach to fulfil all these objectives, especially the social and technological ones. Actually, there are also many cases where economic feasibility and environmental sustainability have also been neglected by local leaders who want to show their performance in terms of increase of GDP or annual income per capita. It's better not to use the local cases from the area where you are conducting the training but ones from elsewhere, to keep your neutral position in local affairs or issues. After your presentation, you can arrange group discussions for the participants to discuss their own cases of failures associated with the top-down approach. Participants usually have plenty of such cases and experiences. They are the project staff or partner line agencies' technicians of the projects, and usually practical persons.

After that, you introduce PRA/PLA as one of the solutions or an

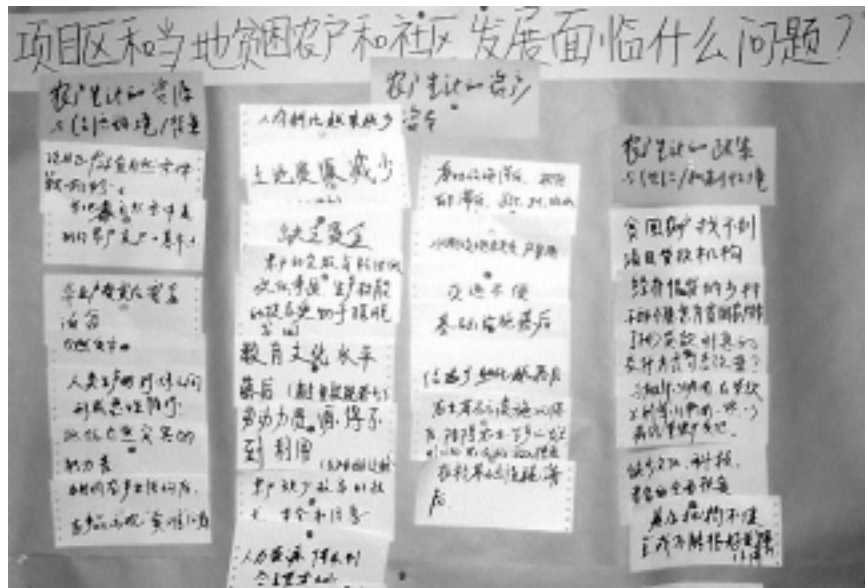
alternative approach to sustainable development, and start the 'What' section. Through such an arrangement to link PRA with the political context, the participants become enthusiastic to discuss their local cases and eager to learn the new approach. By the end of the workshop at the evaluation section, they often recommend that their leaders should be trained or attend such a workshop, because they are the decision or policy makers. If the leaders kept their old mindset, the impact of the training on effectiveness, sustainability and attitude/behaviour change would be very limited.

Tips in the field

During the 'How to do PRA' section, besides the presentation and exercises of PRA methods and tools, some tactics or skills for using the methods and tools are also introduced based on our experiences.

In Chinese situation, it is extremely difficult and not polite or cooperative to have the local officials not accompany the field exercise or PRA survey teams to the field. In many cases tensions exist between the donor organisations or external experts and the local counterparts during the early years or even the whole project cycle, which had been caused by some national or international consultants who insisted on the absence of local officials from the exercises or survey.

A successful alternative strategy in my experience is to persuade local officials to reduce the accompanying number, so as produce a free atmosphere for farmers to talk, on the one hand, and to encourage those who are there to use fully the opportunity to listen to the farmers, their needs, problems and ideas on



the solutions and requirements for assistance. It is actually consistent with the demands of central government for local officials to improve their work and attitudes.

When coming to the place of meeting, the seating has often been arranged already as in a classroom or conference room, with the outsiders sit at the front or chairman stage like the teachers or leaders, and local farmers sit as the students or audients. In such a case, you ask the local community leaders re-arrange the sitting. Have the chairs and stools form a circle or semi-circle. Invite the farmer interviewees to sit in the front rows. This allows them to face each other and be less aware of the presence of local officials, who sit outside the circle or behind them.

Facilitate the discussion to avoid the dominance of the elites

You usually find that village leaders and others with a higher status among the villagers within a community like to talk more or even dominate the discussion. It is not polite to interrupt them directly

according to the culture or social norms of Chinese farmers and rural society. It is also not proper for you to behave like this if you want to build up rapport with the community.

To avoid it you could ask the local partner to try to encourage more people to attend the discussion. Usually, not less than 15 men and 15 women is the minimum, if discussions are to be conducted separately, and the more the better. It make it easier to submerge the elites' voice in the discussion.

You can also politely ask the elites to have a rest from talking and turn to the silenced people to encourage them to talk. Currently, 20 years after rural reform and democratic development in rural areas, Chinese farmers are quite open and don't mind expressing different opinions. The onus lies on the facilitator to create an enabling environment.

Reflect on the PRA process and outputs

For a few years now, I have started to arrange sessions to reflect on the

The result of an assessment session for a IFAD/WFP training on participatory impact assessment, Qinghai Province, China, 2002

process and outputs of the PRA exercises in the evenings after fieldwork, or after the fieldwork. You invite the workshop participants to present the results of using PRA tools, and reflect on the good things and shortcomings, as well as the process, and behaviour and attitude aspects. After the participants have done this, you give your own reflections based on your experience and understanding. You can use paper sheets or a pin board and cards to record the assessment and comments, and include them in the workshop documents.

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Box 1: Example from an IFAD/WFP training in participatory impact assessment

The assessment session was made after the field exercise. The participants made the plenary presentations of the exercise results one after another. After the presentation of one tool exercise, the trainer pointed out the main strongpoint and shortcomings. For example, for the first procedure and tool – the classification of the sub-villages within Maoyu Village with Resource mapping, the main good points included:

- handing over the markers to local farmers and having them decide the direction;
- using Tibetan for the explanation on the map to promote villagers' participation; and
- having shown the obvious differences among the sub-villages.

The key shortcomings included:

- the language obstacle preventing in-depth communication (most of the trainees were not Tibetan but from other minority ethnic groups);
- having not fully used the symbols to produce enough visualisation effect; and
- missing the chance to assess whether the project was reaching the poorer or poorest sub-villages.

The discussion went further to explore if the result revealed useful information about project impact, and comment on the usefulness of the procedure and tools for impact assessment and M&E. For example, the participants appreciated the community map that had reflected the changes before and after the project implementation. This could help identify indicators for Participatory Impact Assessment and M & E.

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ACRONYMS:

IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
WFP	World Food Programme