



Space and time for critical reflection and change

by **ROBERT CHAMBERS**

One of the most pervasive weaknesses of development agencies is the failure to provide staff with opportunities for experiential learning and time for reflection. Many are caught up in a culture of over-commitment, long hours, and intensive work. This is particularly acute in NGOs. Those who are taken as role models work into the night, and start again as soon as they wake up. For them, continuous work is an addictive drug. Staff who go home 'on time' feel guilty. Families suffer, as does personal learning and change. They see no need for courses. What matters is to get on with the urgent jobs to hand. There are many manifestations of this systemic pathology across development agencies. Though bilaterals and multilaterals often have both funds and opportunities to send their staff for field learning experiences, most of them seem to take them up quite rarely. Of over 700 participants in the seven annual PRA Thematic International Workshops organised in India by PRAXIS (the Institute for Participatory Practices), one could count on two hands the number of individuals who have come from multilateral or bilateral aid agencies.¹ And one bilateral donor staff member had to take leave to come.

Yet, time is needed, without pressures and without rush, to ask the 'big' questions, and to understand others' world-views, and tacit and explicit ideas (Dyck et al., 2000). Many organisations convene annual workshops and retreats, but often with overloaded agendas, too much show and tell, too many meetings on the side, and too little time for reflection. Any time allocated is invaded by other sessions that run on, and by contributors who complain that they have been excluded. Parkinson's Law has a corollary: that retreat workshop presentations prolong and proliferate to overflow the time available.²

There is, however, a discernible trend. In writing, more and more authors are prepared to struggle to be honest about their feelings, failures, and learning. Tony Vaux in *The Selfish Altruist* (2001) reflects critically and with disarming honesty on his experiences in relief work in famine and war; and several authors describe their experiences as facilitators in *The Art of Facilitating Participation* (White, 1999). Be it noted that the self-critical reflection we are discussing is a far cry from public confessions in totalitarian countries, or declarations of sinfulness in evangelical meetings. It is, rather, a quiet willingness to be reflexive, to share and learn from reflection and to treat mistakes as opportunities for mutual learning.

¹ CARE is the closest to a bilateral or multilateral agency that has sent a number of staff.

² Parkinson's Law, proposed by C. Northcote Parkinson in a book of that name, is that work expands to fill the time available for its completion.

It is none too soon that the word **reflection** is re-entering the vocabulary of development. The *Pathways to Participation* project (Cornwall and Pratt, 2003) found that PRA practitioners valued critical reflection. PRA itself illustrates the shift. For most of the 1990s, its first decade, it retained its original meaning of 'participatory rural appraisal'. During the later 1990s, the Pakistan PRA network redefined it as 'participation, reflection, and action', and this meaning has spread.³ The Community Development Resource Association in South Africa, in its report *Measuring Development* (CDRA, 2001) has this to say:

There is a peculiar form of self-abasement amongst development workers – donors and practitioners alike. It begins with the fairly righteous stance that we may not spend money intended for the poor on our own development. So we tend not to make time to learn. Yet, this lack of respect for ourselves as our most important 'instruments' in the development project results very quickly in a lack of respect-in-practice for those we claim to serve ... we value action over learning, often doing things to the poor that are inappropriate, even destructive. The benign and laudable claim that resources should go to those they are intended for quickly becomes a more harmful refusal to learn from experience.

³ 'Participation, action, and reflection' would have been better; but the acronym PAR already stood for 'participatory action research', and confusion would have resulted. Reflection and action interact; but reflection is best when grounded in the experience of action.

Mahila Samatha sets aside one tenth of staff time for personal development.⁴ I know of no other organisation that does so. Responsible management in development organisations, one would have thought, would insist on reflective retreats, whether individual or collective, for its staff. Self-critical reflection and respecting the self are still blind spots in development, even though they are a starting point for transforming practice and performance.

There is a danger, though. Things can go too far the other way. Too much time can be taken. Groups themselves can then become addictive, narcissistic, and overly inward-looking. Facilitators can become institutions, like psychoanalysts with their patients. Diminishing returns can set in. After a year of an organisational change process, one DFID field office reportedly declared that it had had enough and wanted to be free to get on with the job. Critical reflection, retreats, and renewal are to be optimised, not maximised. The Sida participation group that met once a month for a year and a half called itself *Lagom*, which means 'not too much, not too little – just enough' in Swedish, a term reflecting the group's desire to engage optimally with the process, and not spend too much, or too little, time and energy on it (Cornwall, Pratt, and Scott-Villiers, 2004).

⁴ Organisations with dangerous tasks and plenty of time in between them, such as fire fighters, may spend quite a lot of time training, but that is not the same as action-reflection and critical self-awareness.

CONTACT DETAILS

Robert Chambers
Participation Group
Institute for Development Studies
University of Sussex
Brighton, BN1 9RE
UK.

NOTE

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