

# Reflections on practical ethics for participatory community-based adaptation

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extracts from ELKANAH ABSALOM *et al.*,  
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## Foreword

The following extracts come from two articles previously published in *Participatory Learning and Action*. Both extracts contain the same key message: that good participatory practice needs to be based on a solid foundation of practical ethics which focus on empowerment.

The first extract is from an article in *PLA Notes* 22, 'Sharing our concerns and looking to the future' (Absalom *et al.*, 1994).<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years ago, a group of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) practitioners shared with readers a set of key guiding principles for participatory development practice.

The next extract is from an article published 12 years later. Here, we include a series of photos taken during a presenta-

tion by Robert Chambers on participatory ethics.<sup>2</sup> Robert's presentation became the basis for an article on practical ethics for participatory mapping practice (Rambaldi *et al.*, 2006). Included here is an adaptation of the 'Who?' and 'Whose?' questions from that article (see Box 1).

As we move forward with community-based adaptation to climate change, these guiding principles provide a timely and relevant reflection on good practice for participatory development.

## Extract: Sharing our concerns and looking to the future

We are an informal group of development practitioners, researchers, and trainers from South and North, using, supporting, and developing participatory approaches, often

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, issue 22 was the first issue in the series to be published under the new name of '*PLA Notes*' in 1994. The series had begun life in 1988 as '*RRA Notes*' (Rapid Rural Appraisal). This change demonstrated the evolution from RRA and then PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal), through to the umbrella term Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), which encompasses a wide range of participatory approaches and methodologies.

<sup>2</sup> Robert's presentation was made at the Mapping for Change International Conference on Participatory Spatial Information Management and Communication, Nairobi, Kenya, September 2005.

known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). A working description of PRA is:

*... a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance, and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act.*

Used well, PRA can enable local people, rural or urban, to undertake their own appraisal, analysis, action, monitoring, and evaluation. It can empower women, poor people, and disadvantaged people, giving them more control over their lives.

As part of a process of reflection, learning, and sharing we have reviewed our experience and current developments. Many donors, government organisations, and NGOs are now requesting and requiring that PRA be used in their programmes and projects. This brings opportunities and dangers. The opportunities are to initiate and sustain processes of change: empowering disadvantaged people and communities, transforming organisations, and reorienting individuals. The dangers come from demanding too much, in a top-down mode, too fast, with too little understanding of participatory development and its implications.

PRA practitioners have come to stress personal behaviour and attitudes, role reversals, facilitating participation through group processes and visualisation, critical self-awareness, embracing error, and sharing without boundaries. We believe that these principles and concepts must be placed at the centre of all participatory development activities. Experience has led us, and many others to recognise the implications of participatory approaches, such as PRA, for:

- personal and professional values, norms, and behaviour;
- community issues;
- organisational structures, styles, and practices of management;
- approaches and methods in training;
- networking and sharing between all

actors engaged in the development and spread of participatory thinking and practice; and,

- the policies and practices of donors.

We recognise that we are only a few among many around the world who are striving to develop and facilitate the spread of participatory approaches. We offer this statement of principles in the hope that others will share their experiences, views, and values in the same spirit so that we can all continue to learn from each other. We welcome your responses.

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### **Personal and professional**

We strongly believe that, as PRA professionals, we bear a personal responsibility to:

- Develop a self-critical attitude, recognising that we are continually learning, and welcome rigorous peer review.
- Be explicit about whether we are eliciting information for external use, or are engaged in processes leading to community action. We should make this distinction clear to the people with whom we are interacting and document this accordingly.
- Interact with others (colleagues, community members, and other professionals) with respect and empathy, transparency, and support.
- Recognise the need to acquire both training skills and 'hands-on' experience in carrying out a PRA process in the field.
- Make a commitment to value equally the contributions made by all partners (South, North, local, external) and respect the need for diversity of others' views and approaches.

- Identify, in partnership with communities, appropriate forms of compensation when we are eliciting information for external use.
- Ensure that credit and compensation are given where due.
- Strive towards a process of empowerment of marginalised people, in which PRA methods can play a part.
- Attempt to link up with existing PRA networks and professionals in every context.
- Equip ourselves with any necessary skills to recognise, acknowledge, and address the existence of diversity of social relations in each context.

These are all signs of personal and professional commitment to pursue development processes which strive to improve the lives of those who are (relatively) marginalised.

## Community issues

### Ethics

In relation to interactions with communities, we strive to:

- achieve mutual respect, including a commitment to long-term partnerships;
- be honest with ourselves about our own objectives; and
- be open, honest, and transparent about our objectives with all community sections.

### Equity

We recognise that:

- Different groups, as defined locally by age, gender, well-being, ethnicity, religion, caste, language etc. have different perspectives.
- There should be commitment by outside organisations to understand different needs and multiple perspectives within communities.
- Responding to the needs of the vulnerable involves respect for all groups. This may mean challenging asymmetrical relationships via conflict resolution methods.

### Preconditions for engagement

- Be honest with the community about what is in it for them.
- PRA activities should lead to direct improvements in the community through:
  - Operational development on the ground.
  - Changes in higher level institutions (such as research, extension, and planning) which have an impact at community level.
  - Shifts in policy, which have an impact at community level.
  - We should also acknowledge that some of these expected changes cannot be guaranteed.
- There should be no one-off exercises in communities without explicitly defined outcomes as described above.

### Practice

- The process with the community should begin with explanations and seeking their permission.
- Timing and pace should be governed by local context of separate sections of the community.
- Respect the fact that information is generated by local people and so ask their permission to document, remove, and use information. When possible, ensure that original diagrams and copies of reports remain in the community.

### Local human resource support and development

This involves a commitment to:

- enhance capacity of local people, on an individual as well as an institutional basis, to be PRA practitioners and trainers in analysis and implementation of developmental activities in their own and neighbouring communities;
- ensure that PRA activities lead to strengthening of existing and/or formation of new local institutions, in order to meet local needs; and,
- ensure follow-up support for community sections and their institutions.

## Institutional aspects

### Long-term commitment to process

- Top managers/decision makers need to commit themselves to a long-term process going 'beyond projects' to promote a participatory development approach.

### Organisational environment and culture

- The organisational culture should provide opportunities to enable learning from experiences and mistakes, and should be flexible enough to allow experimentation.

### Institutional management and styles

- There should be a transition from management styles based on hierarchy, inhibited communications, and command and obedience relationships to more organic styles that encourage lateral communication, collegial authority, and flexible roles and procedures.
- Institutions should create conditions that encourage employees to be participatory in their work with each other, and not just during 'field visits'.

### Incentives/rewards

- Incentives and rewards must encourage staff to be honest, work in the field with communities, stay on as staff, and encourage joint action between institutions and villages.

### Organisational procedures and implementation

- Organisational and programme management procedures should be changed so as to enable linking PRA with programme management and implementation (e.g. decentralisation of funds management). They should try to build PRA from the start of the programme cycle.
- PRA and related participatory processes should be initially piloted on a small-scale and should be mainly implemented through local institutions.

## Outward linkages

- There is a need to develop effective linkages (e.g. training exchange, co-management of projects, information flows) outside of institutions to help partners (including donors) understand more and strengthen participatory processes. These linkages must be based on mutual respect, integrity, and trust.

## Donors

### Donors working with PRA should...

- focus on PRA as a **process** leading to change, not a product in and of itself (this means commitment to long-term development processes and follow-up activities and support);
- provide more flexible funding and move towards more open-ended, event-focused targets for disbursement and physical achievement;
- promote participatory monitoring and self-evaluation procedures which build in reciprocal accountability (communities, development organisations, donors);
- encourage and support organisations which can move towards participatory training and learning to help other organisations change;
- encourage policies and programmes which offer a range of development options/choices based on locally-defined criteria, needs, and priorities;
- encourage establishment of small, self-managed teams of practitioners and trainers within development organisations – where appropriate – with the freedom to experiment, innovate, make and learn from mistakes, and act;
- support pilot learning processes with gradual/phased scaling-up depending on local conditions; and,
- avoid confusing and over-burdening development organisations by harmonising funding approaches and accounting and reporting procedures.

**Source:** *PLA Notes* (1995), Issue 22, pp. 5–10, IIED: London

## Extract: Practical ethics for PGIS practitioners, facilitators, technology intermediaries, and researchers

### Box 1: Compilation of 'Who?' and 'Whose?' Questions

#### Stage I: planning

##### Who participates?

- Who decides on who should participate?
- Who participates in whose community-based adaptation process?
- ... And who is left out?

##### Who identifies the problem?

- Whose problems?
- Whose questions?
- Whose perspectives?
- ... And whose problems, questions, and perspectives are left out?

#### Stage II: the participatory process

##### Whose voice counts? Who controls the process?

- Who decides on what is important?
- Who decides, and who should decide, on what to document and make public?
- Who has visual and tactile access?
- Who controls the use of information?
- ... And who is marginalised?

##### Whose reality? And who understands?

- Whose reality is expressed?
- Whose knowledge, categories, perceptions?
- Whose truth and logic?
- Who is informed about what is being documented? (Transparency)
- Who understands the physical output? And who does not?
- ... And whose reality is left out?

#### Stage III: resulting information control, disclosure, and disposal

##### Who owns the output?

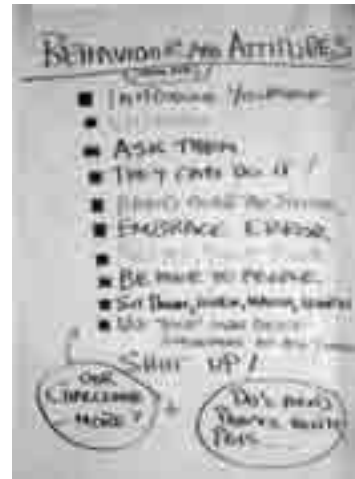
- Who owns the resulting data?
- What is left with those who generated the information and shared their knowledge?
- Who keeps the physical output and organises its regular updating?
- ... And who does not?

##### Whose analysis and use?

- Who analyses the information collated?
- Who has access to the information and why?
- Who will use it and for what?
- ... And who cannot access and use it?

##### Ultimately ...

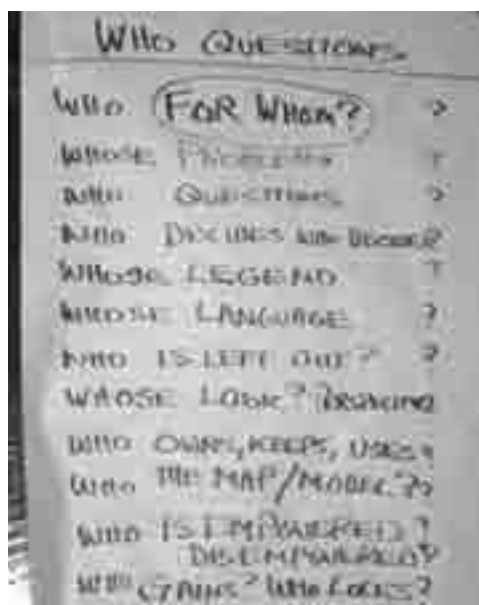
- What has changed?
- Who benefits from the changes?
- At whose costs?
- Who gains and who loses?
- Who is empowered?
- ... And who is disempowered?



Work in progress: Robert Chambers' flipchart notes on behaviour and attitudes.



Participatory mapping for good change: notes from Robert Chambers' presentation at the Mapping for Change conference, 2005.



The 'Who' and 'Whose' questions presented by Robert Chambers.



Building on the 'Who' and 'Whose' questions: discussion on participatory ethics.

Photos: Johan Minnie/Jeroen Verplanke

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